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January 4, 1881.

NO. 60. VOL. III. PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS, 98 WILLIAM ST., N.Y. PRICE, 5 CENTS.



CECIL FLUNG HERSELF OVER THE SIDE OF THE BALCONY.

Cecil's Deceit; or, The Diamond Legacy.

BY MRS. JENNIE DAVIS BURTON.

CHAPTER I.

MISTRESS AND MAID.

A SUBDUED bustle of out-going and in-coming; the slight jar of doors which otherwise opened and shut noiselessly; passing footsteps muffled by the thick carpeting of the passageways; these were the sounds which stamped its character upon the Breton House. It was a quiet hotel, removed alike in equal degree from the pomp of magnificent metropolitan

establishments, and the shabby gentility, the prying, meddling surveillance of family boarding-houses.

Captain Collingsbrooke, with his daughter and her single attendant, had just established himself in the suite of rooms he had previously written to order.

These were on the second floor, and consisted of four apartments occupying one side of a branch passageway. First was the captain's own room, redolent already of his favorite "Yacht Club." Then, a private parlor, not large, but comfortable and home-like. Next was Miss Collingsbrooke's apartment, a wide room fitted with essential accessories to a lady's convenience; and beyond, separated from it by a dressing-closet, was a smaller and plainly-furnished chamber, designated to the use of Miss Collingsbrooke's maid.

CECIL'S DECEIT.

A porter was bringing up the luggage just arrived. His foot tripped upon the door-sill of the captain's room, and he staggered forward violently, precipitating the trunk he carried upon the center of the floor. Captain Collingsbrooke, irate, broke forth with an oath at his awkwardness.

"If you please, sir, I couldn't help it," protested the man, ruefully rubbing his elbow, which had been grazed by the falling article.

"Help it! Hump, who said you could? Why, you idiot, that is not mine. Get away until I see!"

Examination only proved that he had been correct. The trunk was marked Crossford, or Crawford, Breton House, and the remainder of the luggage was for the same.

"Then it's for the gentleman on the next floor," the porter said. "He came on the same train as you, sir, and like enough your baggage has got mixed."

But a consultation with the said gentleman failed to reveal the whereabouts of the captain's traveling paraphernalia. A messenger, dispatched in hot haste to the baggage-rooms, met with no better success. Evidently, by some mistake, the trunks had not been put off the train. Accommodating officials regretted the occurrence, and promised their return by the following morning.

This was by no means satisfactory to Captain Collingsbrooke. He loved his own ease and fumed at trifling inconveniences. Just now he wanted the comforts of dressing-gown and slippers, a smoke and a nap in an easy-chair, with his heels upon the center-table. The non-arrival of his baggage disturbed at once his plans and his temper, the latter being of very mercurial character.

Railway officials, hackman and porter, all were subjected to the ban of his anathemas. He stamped and blustered as was his wont when his choler was aroused, and in the midst of it all, Miss Collingsbrooke appeared upon the scene.

"What is it, papa dear? Has anything occurred to annoy you?"

"Anything? Yes, I should think so. Enough has occurred."

Then, partly because his breath was exhausted, partly that his gouty limbs rebelled against the free use he had been making of them, and that the man against whose tympanum he was discharging his word-volleys here disappeared, he permitted his wrath to subside in a few muttered growls as he sunk back into his chair.

"Enough has occurred. The blundering vagabonds have carried on our luggage. You'll have to do without your fol-de-rols, my girl."

"Is that all, papa? I feared it was something of a serious nature."

"Is it nothing to have all my calculations disturbed? Is it nothing to miss my nap and my dishabille? Nothing to see you rusty from travel when Frampton may arrive at any minute? You do honor, Eve, to your English blood if you are proof against it all. Confound the careless villains!"

"Then we'll not go down to-night, will we, dear? Let us have tea together, you and I, as if we were at home. Indeed, papa, I should prefer it. I am quite wearied out."

Miss Collingsbrooke knew that the best method of restoring her father's equanimity was to distract his attention from the annoying subject.

"You do look tired, Eve," he said, with a touch of solicitude. "You must get more brightness into your face. Don't let Frampton think you are a victim prepared for a sacrifice."

"A night's rest is all I need. Oh, papa, if when all is over, I should find that I have made a mistake!"

She clasped her long, thin hands nervously, a doubting, troubled look upon her face.

"Nonsense! You are not used to being whimsical, my girl. Don't get absurd ideas, now. Think what it is for me to give you up, but I do it willingly for your own good."

"I shall always love you dearest of any one in the world, papa. I know that you only desire my happiness. But this is such an irrevocable step, and now that the time draws near it frightens me."

"Frightened at thought of your marriage, the consummation for which most young ladies devoutly pray? Remember how my heart is set upon it!"

"I shall be guided by you as I always have been. Don't think that I'm going to disappoint you now! I wish I need never leave you—need never owe allegiance to another man."

"Pooh, pooh, child! that is not in the nature of things. Run away now, and take a rest before I order supper."

"Not until I see you comfortable. This great sleepy hollow of a chair is just what you will like. There! now draw off your boots, and put your poor feet upon these cushions. A pillow to your head, and your pipe filled! Is there anything more, papa?"

"As if there could be anything you would not think of! No, dear. What a treasure you are to me, Eve!"

She did not reply, but laid her face down with caressing motion against his. Then, touching her lips to his forehead, she went away, leaving him to woo forgetfulness through the influence of his favorite weed.

Later, they met at the tea-table in mutually agreeable moods. Captain Collingsbrooke, refreshed by his slumber, and with appetite sharpened at sight of a delicious repast, retained his natural good-humor unbroken by slight ebullitions of temper as were very common with him. And Eve put aside her misgivings of the future to devote herself to anticipating her father's wishes.

At a word from her he dismissed the servant, and let Eve wait upon him. This she did with a skill which displayed her familiarity with the duty.

It was a happy hour followed by a happy evening. Each knew that it might be the last which they should spend alone together, and lent mutual effort to have it pass so that in time to come they might refer to it as an unclouded remembrance.

How well it is that the inevitable future is veiled from our sight! Neither realized anything of the shadow hovering over them—neither felt the chill of the dark presence lingering near.

When they had bidden each other good-night, and Miss Collingsbrooke was back in her own room where her maid awaited her, something of the troubled feeling that had haunted her during the day came again.

She put herself under the hands of the maid almost mechanically. The latter was a young woman with a bearing easy and ladylike beyond that which usually marks those of her station. Without having any actual basis for the belief, it had been silently conceded from the first, by Captain Collingsbrooke and his daughter, that she had at no very remote period occupied a much higher social position.

Miss Collingsbrooke, deserted by her own attendant at the last moment, had engaged her on the eve of their departure from their native England. Several months had elapsed since that, occupied in traveling through the United States, the land which was henceforth to be their home.

Between the two—mistress and maid—had sprung up a warm friendship, which, on one side at least, had ripened into positive attachment. Miss Collingsbrooke's affection was manifested by the unlimited confidence she bestowed.

"Are you not well to-night, Miss Eve?" queried the maid, as with deft fingers she undid the fair, heavy bands of the lady's hair.

"Quite well, Cecil. Only a little inclined to regret the liberty I must soon relinquish. I am glad Mr. Frampton did not arrive to-night."

An amused smile played about Cecil Blake's lips.

"Are you not anxious to make the acquaintance of your fiance, Miss Eve?"

"Oh, I know him already from his letters. He is a good, kind man, I am sure, and perhaps in time I may learn to love him almost as well as papa. But, Cecil, marriage should be regarded as a holy ordinance, and how can I so regard mine, which has been settled upon as a mere matter of business? I am given to almost a total stranger—though he was a friend of papa's when they were young men together—in return for certain settlements of lands and dollars. Can I love and honor him as a husband, or will he seem to me only in the light of a purchaser, myself his chattel?"

"It is very pleasant to be rich," suggested Cecil. "To be young and beautiful, the petted wife of an indulgent old man, is a fate most young ladies would be eager to embrace. You don't know what actual poverty is, Miss Eve, or you would never hesitate. You don't know what it is to love beautiful things which you cannot enjoy, to long for luxury and be tied down to a life of constant drudgery. Youth and beauty are no more than a fair exchange for certain wealth."

The speaker's face flushed a little with her earnestness of feeling. She uttered her words vehemently, as though they were the outbreak of some sudden impulse, but her tone had something bitter in it which Eve Collingsbrooke did not like.

"I am afraid that is not good doctrine, Cecil, even though I am being guided by it. But I shall not give my individuality alone; I shall strive to be always a dutiful wife."

"You'll be happy, too," said Cecil, her face and voice softening. "The good always are."

It was Eve's turn to flush now. When alone together the two had long since fallen into habits of equality, but this night there was a shadow of restraint, felt rather than distinctly indicated, in their familiar intercourse.

There was silence between them for a time, and then Miss Collingsbrooke, who had been idly watching their two figures reflected side by side in the mirror, reached up and drew Cecil's face down near hers.

"Youth and beauty," she said, repeating the words of the other. "You have them both, Cecil. Why is it not you instead of me who is to reap fortune through them? And see how much we are alike! Strange that I never observed it so clearly before. We might readily pass for sisters."

There was indeed a striking resemblance between them, heightened perhaps by the similarity of the dresses they wore. The simple gray traveling-suits were unlike in no special detail, their height and figures were much the same.

Both had heavy fair hair, but that of the maid had a glint and ripple in it, while Miss Collingsbrooke's was dead blonde. The features of the latter were fine, regular and clearly cut, her complexion fair but rather pale, her eyes hazel. Cecil's face was perhaps less pure, but with a fullness of outline and freshness of color which the other's lacked; her eyes deep blue as is sometimes seen in paintings on rare old china.

The points of resemblance between the two would strike an observer more forcibly after seeing them separately. This was probably the reason that neither had been much impressed by the fact. When together, so many minor differences crept to view that the great effect was lost.

As Eve gazed, and endeavored to define the similarity, it seemed to fade into only a general resemblance of figure and feature.

"It was the light, I dare say," Cecil remarked, composedly. "All fair people look more or less alike, I think. Is there anything more to-night, Miss Eve?"

"Nothing more. Good-night, Cecil!"

But in her own room, the maid held the light where it shone full upon her, scanning her features with

close scrutiny. Then she sat down, shaking her hair from the thick net which had confined it, until it glinted and waved like a golden vail about her shoulders. A gratified look crept into her eyes.

"Yes, we are alike," she murmured. "Alike, as substance and shadow; alike, as the pale offspring of the photographer's art is like the living reality. Yet she will gain the wealth I covet, while I, brighter and fairer, must wait—wait!"

There was a shadow creeping down over Cecil Blake's face, which made it less fair to look upon. The color faded out, the lips grew set and firm, the eyes emitted a coruscant gleam.

"Only one thing to live for now," she was saying to herself. "Only my ambition to be gratified. Only an advantage to be gained, a point won. How long shall I have to wait, I wonder?"

She sat there silently thinking. The time wore on imperceptibly; an hour chimed, then another, but she sat there motionless still.

Sleep stole down upon her unawares. A medley of dreams assailed her, wild fancies bore her away on their spirit wings. Visions were there of time that had been, and of time to come, of things possible and impossible, struggling confusedly in the mind which is never at rest, even when sleep lays its quiet upon the body, and lulls the working functions of the train to nominal repose.

Then came a concourse of increasing sounds, which first mingled in with her dreams. The trampling of feet, the ringing of bells, hoarse shouts, from seeming the picture of fancy became suddenly a reality.

She sprung up, broad awake, to find a vivid glare illuminating the room; the hissing and crackling of flames; a scorching heat; the atmosphere painfully oppressive; the smell of burning wood; and from without the terrible cry, "Fire, fire!"

CHAPTER II.

THE PATH OF FIRE.

For a single instant Cecil stood motionless, paralyzed by terror. Above the crackling of the flames, and the hoarse shouts of the multitude without, she could hear the shrieks of women, the groans and prayers of those already shut off from escape.

The fire had burst out through the windows below, and was lapping up the outer walls with insatiable tongues that fastened upon every devourable object. The crackling and falling of glass, and the sight of the yellow blaze curling in, recalled her senses, bringing a realization of her own imminent peril.

She sprung to the door of the dressing-closet opening into Miss Collingsbrooke's room. A cloud of dense smoke met her there. It drove her back, blinded, suffocating. She had the precaution to shut the door against it, and stood gasping. The heat was intense. It was drawing blisters on her flesh, though as yet no flames had reached her room except the lapping tongues about the casements.

There was another door opening into the corridor. She groped her way to this, as she went snatching a woolen scarf from the table where she had thrown it carelessly on the preceding evening.

In the corridor and to the right she was met by a wall of solid flame. The stairway and the space beyond were all ablaze. Behind her a vestibule opened into a wing of the building. She stood along this, guiding herself by the touch of the blistering walls.

As she ran she gathered up her long, floating hair, and bound it firmly with her scarf. A morsel of feminine reasoning, which clung to her even during the horror of that moment, an instinct which reminded her that every attribute of beauty which she possessed was dear to her as life itself, prompted the action.

Up some steps, then on again. Turning angles this way and that, driven back at times by the visible presence of the fire demon, but all else veiled from her sight by the stifling smoke.

A sudden fear struck her. Might she not lose herself in this maze of passageways, be tortured by the flames creeping slowly down upon her from every side? Her brain was no longer clear. Thoughts trooped through; wild, absurd fancies, which tempted her to stop there in the midst of danger and laugh shrilly.

The sound of her voice, dying to a moan upon her lips, sobered her. She staggered forward less confidently now.

A breath of fresh air came to her like an assurance of salvation to a perishing soul. Gasping, she struggled on. Then the smoke rolled back, and an open doorway lay before her.

"Saved!" she cried, joyfully, as the outer air swept her cheek. In the same breath she uttered a cry of despairing horror. A sheet of flame shot up almost in her face. An instant more and she would be certainly lost.

She flung the skirt of her dress over her head and dashed through the fiery barrier. Fortunately her garments were of woolen stuffs, and, though shrivelled and crisped, did not ignite. She stood without the doorway, which she fancied would lead her to safety, but with a single glance grew faint with the hopelessness of her situation.

She stood on an iron balcony not more than twenty feet from the ground. But the steps were gone; above, below, and all around, the flames were raging in unrestrained fury. Beneath was a dark swaying crowd, that, looking up, seemed to see her in the very midst of the devouring element.

The stillness of horror which had fallen on all was broken by a voice:

"Jump, for God's sake! Forward, men, all of you! Jump, and we will save you!"

A puff of air carried a rush of flame down upon her. With no thought except the desperate impulse to escape it, Cecil flung herself over the side of the balcony.

Scores of strong arms were outstretched to receive her. There was a recoil in the foremost group, caused by the impetus of her descending body, then a deafening shout went up announcing her safety.

Cecil, stunned by her fall, heard the glad cry, and then lay without sense or motion in the arms of her rescuers. The terrible strain removed, mind and nerve succumbed, and she lost all consciousness.

A stalwart man, with face and hands begrimed by the active service he had been rendering—the same who had called to her to take the leap—volunteered to take charge of the helpless girl. He received her in his arms and bore her back through the crowd, which opened before him.

A moment later came the order, "Back! back!" The multitude swayed as a body, and wavered away from the burning building not a moment too soon. There was the crash of falling walls, blazing timbers hurled downward which sent out showers of glowing sparks, and what had been the stately Breton House, lay a mass of ruins.

It was breaking day, as Cecil's protector, Richard Holstead by name, hurried down one of the side streets leading from the more noted thoroughfare. This was Broad street, and the buildings here, for the most part, were private dwellings, many of them detached and having inclosures, smaller or greater, to accord with the pretensions of the different places. At some distance down the street, the young man paused before a neat two-story frame house, separated from the sidewalk by a narrow grass-plot and light iron railing.

Passing through the gateway, he was met by a pleasant-faced elderly lady, who greeted him with affectionate solicitude.

"Richard, my dear boy! you are not hurt?"

"No, mother: but here is a young lady who will require your attention. I think she is not seriously injured, but you can send Patty for a physician if you find it necessary. I must hurry back again, though I fear there is little more to be done."

"Poor thing! poor thing! Bring her into my room, Dick. I couldn't think of lying still while human beings were in danger so near, and my boy, perhaps, risking his life to aid them. Did you rescue her?"

"Not alone, mother; I'll tell you all about it by and-by. You'll do your best for her, I know. Ah, she is coming to herself again."

Following his mother through the hall and up the stairway into a neat bedroom, where the gas was still burning, Richard Holstead placed his fair burden upon a couch. After a word or two, he went out again, promising to return ere long.

Cecil moved and moaned, and after a moment opened her eyes, the horror still lingering in them.

"Am I saved?" she asked, "or was it all a dream? Ah, my poor hands!"

She raised them painfully. Both hands and wrists were drawn to white blisters. Her face, too, had been blistered by the heat; but her hair, her beautiful golden hair, lay unharmed beneath its secure covering. She did not so much mind the rest, when she made herself aware of this.

"There, there, dear! don't distress yourself," said Mrs. Holstead, soothingly. "You are safe, you see. Let me bind up your hands; I will be very gentle. There are no deep burns, but they will be painful for a time."

Then, with exquisite tact, she strove to divert her patient's mind from the calamity which had befallen her, while she applied lotions and poultices to the injured members.

Cecil's nervous system had been shaken by the peril she had passed. She was faint and ill from the effect of it. She was very quiet, moving with an effort when Mrs. Holstead proceeded to disrobe her, and clothe her in a loose wrapper of her own.

"Now, lie still, dear, and sleep if you can. Drink this; you will feel better for it when you wake again."

She brought a glass of wine into which she poured a few drops of a composing draught. Cecil swallowed it, and closed her eyes wearily.

Mrs. Holstead turned out the gas and softly opened the windows. By this time the sun had fairly risen, falling in yellow light on opposite roofs, while the street beneath was yet filled by the long shadows. She adjusted the screens until a softened gloom pervaded the apartment. Then ascertaining that her patient already slept, she went out, closing the door after her.

Going down to the kitchen she found Patty, the one servant kept in the little household, busy preparing the morning meal.

"What have you there, Patty—muffins? Ah, that's well; Dick is fond of them. And the meat—veal, is it? Run out, child, and get a beefsteak at the market-stall on the corner. Poor Dick will be tired, and need a substantial breakfast."

After adding to the order another item or two with reference to her son's taste, she passed into the dining-room adjoining. This was a square apartment, with a bright carpet on the floor and white shades to the windows. A light, cheerful room, furnished with a tall walnut sideboard, elaborately carved at the top; a few chairs of the same material, and an extension table—generally used in its contracted form. Everything was very simple and very useful, but homelike and attractive to an extent which more elaborate establishments often lack.

Mrs. Holstead wheeled out the round table, and covering it with a spotless cloth, proceeded to arrange thereon a breakfast set of old-fashioned fragile china and service of well-preserved silver.

They were not rich, these Holsteads, but they belonged to a good old family in the middle grade of life, and had an air of extreme respectability—which in a higher station would have passed current for aristocratic refinement—clinging to them. Honest, well educated people, who found favor with the

masses, the more readily, perhaps, because they never sought it.

The mother was a widow, whose whole life and happiness were bound up in her one son. Her pride in him was not all a mother's blind partiality. Richard Holstead was one of that type of men whom great crises develop into heroes. One who might labor at the vocation which he had chosen or which circumstances had thrust upon him all his days, performing his work always faithfully, and never suspect the energies lying dormant within him. But let the proper moment arrive, the requirement exist, then the faculty to plan and the ability to execute would make themselves manifest, certainly as the striking of flint and steel has the power to produce flame.

He came in while his mother was yet busied about her pleasant task. She had time to observe now that he was blackened with smoke and dust, his beard and eyebrows slightly singed. He had been among those to penetrate within the burning building, seeking to save life and property, while it was accessible.

"Was the hotel entirely destroyed, Richard?" she asked.

"Not only that, mother, but many lives with it. The men worked bravely, but it was impossible to rescue all."

"Oh, it is terrible," said Mrs. Holstead, shudderingly.

But frequent acquaintance with such occurrences, as almost any inhabitant of a large city must know, wears off the sharp edge of the accompanying horror. So, Mrs. Holstead whipped the cream for the toast, and buttered the muffins in the covered dish, while her son passed through to the closed porch where the pump stood, and proceeded to remove the traces of his late toil.

Ten minutes later, they were seated together at the breakfast-table, and Richard related such incidents connected with the conflagration as had come within his personal observation.

"And the young lady, mother," he asked, "how is she?"

"Sleeping quietly. She has been terribly shocked, as is only natural, but is in no danger whatever. Did you ascertain who she is?"

"I made inquiry, and it is clearly evident that she is Miss Collingsbrooke, the daughter of an English gentleman, who arrived only yesterday. And, mother, he is among the missing."

Mrs. Holstead let her spoon rest on the edge of her cup, and paled a little.

"Poor thing, poor young girl!" she murmured, pitifully.

It was late in the day when Cecil awoke. Her kind hostess was sitting by the bedside, and came forward as the girl moved slightly.

"Awake, my dear? You are refreshed, I am sure. Don't stir until I have brought you a cup of tea."

She went quietly away, and returned almost immediately with a tray, on which were a few delicate viands. This she placed on a stand by the bed, and bolstered Cecil to a sitting posture.

The latter ate sparingly, and drank with feverish thirst. She was strengthened, but with an apathetic feeling lingering yet. When she had finished she looked up into Mrs. Holstead's motherly face.

"I don't remember how I came here," she said, "but you are very kind. May I trouble you still further?"

"I am anxious to render you comfortable," the lady assured her. "Pray don't consider any request you can make in the light of a trouble."

"Will you get me to-day's papers?"

"I am not sure that it will be best for you just now," was the hesitating reply.

"Oh, I am quite strong. Indeed I must know the worst of the danger I escaped."

"But, my dear Miss Collingsbrooke, any excitement—"

"Then I shall insist upon getting them myself," Cecil declared, with perverse willfulness. Sorely disturbed, Mrs. Holstead went down to take counsel with her son.

"It may be as well that she shall know it at once," he said. "She will grow anxious regarding her father soon, and then the truth cannot be kept from her."

So the papers were given to Cecil, but first her hostess endeavored to break the mournful news.

"My dear child," she said, "you must be strong to bear a great sorrow. You know what a narrow escape you had; but there were others less fortunate—some who were not rescued."

Cecil put out her bandaged hand, only saying:

"Let me see!"

She had not corrected Mrs. Holstead's mistake regarding her name. Perhaps she had not observed it. But now, as her eye glanced down the column devoted to the conflagration of the morning, the knowledge that this misapprehension had arisen was made apparent.

The names of Captain Collingsbrooke and Cecil Blake were in the list of those who had perished. Miss Collingsbrooke was described as having escaped by precipitating herself from the balcony.

The paper crushed beneath Cecil's trembling hand, and her face grew white as the pillow against which it was pressed. Strange that the words which Eve had spoken to her when they were together last should be the first to recur to her now.

"Youth and beauty! You have them both, Cecil. Why is it not you, instead of me, who is to reap fortune through them?"

CHAPTER III.

FACE TO FACE.

In that moment Cecil never thought of the awful fate which had met her kind young mistress. She only saw the opportunity it had opened before her,

and even this she did not yet permit herself to contemplate clearly. But the idea had come, the sudden force of it stilling her blood for an instant; the next it was leaping through her veins at fever speed.

Mrs. Holstead went away softly. She thought it best that the other should be alone with her supposed grief at first.

Dick was walking slowly back and forth in the room below. It grieved him to know that the life of the girl he had aided to save should be at once clouded by such a sorrow. He looked up inquiringly as his mother entered.

"Does she know?"

"Yes, and has taken it more quietly than I had hoped. But the stillest grief is often the deepest. I'd rather she had cried out than to grow white and quiet as she did."

And above in the shaded room Cecil lay still, not trying to resist the temptation which assailed her.

"I did not seek this end," she said, to herself. "It has been thrust upon me. Why should I correct the mistakes which others have made—why not accept it as my destiny?"

Then she felt a pang of genuine regret as Eve Collingsbrooke's gentle face rose before her mental sight.

"It is doing her no harm," she argued. "If she was alive I would not wrong her even to advance myself. But, why should I thrust aside the profit her death may bring me?"

If a struggle between wrong and right it was a very unequal one. But I think from the time the thought first came to her, Cecil had decided upon her course. I think she strove to make even herself believe that Cecil Blake, the maid, had been buried in the ruins of the smoking pyre, and that she who had escaped was Eve Collingsbrooke.

At least she accepted the situation that day without making an effort either to relinquish or retain it. It was staking all on a chance to be sure, but one which seemed secure.

During the past few months she had learned much of the previous history of the Collingsbrookes. The captain was of English parentage, but American born and reared. They were allied to a noble family—the father had been an honorable, and he was the cousin of an earl.

The elder Collingsbrooke, sacrificing his degree before the promptings of necessity, emigrated to the United States and engaged in trade. He was not eminently successful, realizing no more than a comfortable subsistence from his business operations.

It was at this early date that a warm friendship was established between the English merchant and a competitor in the same line of business, named Frampton. The younger members of the two families were upon most intimate terms.

When young Collingsbrooke attained his majority, through the intervention of his titled relatives he was sent back to England, and the same purchased for him a commission in the queen's service. He married in that country, and the subsequent death of his parents seemed to sever completely the ties which bound him to the western world.

He was English in his ideas and prejudices, but one association of his youth always clung to him. This was his friendship for Hugh Frampton. A regular correspondence was maintained between the two. The latter had not married, and as Collingsbrooke's daughter grew toward womanhood, she was destined by him as his friend's future wife. An agreement to this effect had long existed between them.

In accordance with this, Captain Collingsbrooke had settled his affairs in England, and prepared to make his permanent home in America. He was in no haste to relinquish his daughter, hence his delay since their arrival before opening personal communication with her husband elect.

The date and place of their meeting had been arranged, however, the time for the marriage fixed.

This much Cecil knew—Mr. Frampton had never seen his destined bride. Even had he done so, the remarkable resemblance existing between the two young women would have readily deceived him. Cecil entertained no apprehension that the imposition she had decided to practice would result in discovery.

Good Mrs. Holstead was much puzzled by the strange apathy of her patient. She had expected some outburst of feeling ere long, and was alarmed at Cecil's perfect quietude.

It was quite dusk in the room when she went in to her again. She placed a shaded night-lamp on the table, and stepped quietly to the bedside. Cecil was not sleeping, but lay with closed eyes, and a drawn, hard expression about her mouth. Mrs. Holstead's womanly heart was full of sympathy. She laid her hand softly on the girl's head.

"My poor child! I can feel for you in your affliction, for I know what it is to have lost dear ones. But, God is very good, and He does for the best."

Cecil drew herself away from the soothing touch.

"Oh, don't, don't!" she cried out, sharply. "You don't know—you can't know!" And with that she burst out in a passion of dry, gasping sobs.

It was not acting, this emotion of hers. She had been tenderly attached to her young mistress, and a feeling of envy had sprung up in her mind at times, it was all washed away now, leaving a sincere regret for her untimely fate. She could honestly mourn for her whose name she had usurped.

This first outbreak of grief over, she became quiet again. Mrs. Holstead watched by her during the evening. It was early yet when Cecil turned to her, saying:

"Please don't let me keep you from your rest. I am very grateful for your kindness, but don't make me feel that I am a burden. I shall be much better to-morrow."

"Is there nothing more I can do?" asked her hostess, drawing the curtains closer. "Is there anything you would like which I have neglected to provide; any immediate personal convenience, I mean? for, of course, your wardrobe was entirely destroyed."

Cecil roused herself, remembering the oversight which had given Captain Collingsbrooke such annoyance on the preceding day. She explained this to Mrs. Holstead.

"The trunks are probably returned by this time," she said. "If you will be kind enough to have them brought here, I should like to remain while I am in the city. I shall not trespass long."

"We will not permit you to leave us until your friends claim you," the other declared, warmly.

"And," continued Cecil, "we were expecting a friend—a gentleman—to meet us at the Breton House. I fear he will be much distressed on my account, if he finds no clew to my whereabouts."

"What is the gentleman's name, dear? My son will find him for you if he has arrived."

"Hugh Frampton, of Frampton!"

Mrs. Holstead was turning away, when an impulse seized Cecil to at once avow the utter responsibility of her equivocal position.

"Mrs. Holstead!"

The latter paused.

"Mr. Frampton is my betrothed husband. You will understand now why I am anxious he should learn of my safety. The statement in the papers would only augment his distress by leaving him in ignorance regarding the injuries I might have sustained."

"My dear," Mrs. Holstead said, coming back to the bed to kiss the girl's cheek, "I am glad for your sake you are not left without a tender guardian. Dick shall see to everything soon as possible. I shall occupy the room adjoining this; if you want anything during the night, don't hesitate to call upon me."

Cecil thanked her and was glad to be alone. She wanted to think over the course she had outlined for herself—to scan closely as she could the vista of the new existence she had already entered.

There are some people, who, upon making a decision, determine that, no matter what the consequence may prove, be the result good or ill, they will not regret having taken the step. Cecil was one of these. No qualms of conscience for the imposition she was practicing disturbed her thoughts. Her sorrow for Eve was sincere, but it was secondary to the consideration of her own benefit. She had little to fear, but she meant to take all feasible precautions against the possibility of future detection.

She would require no *coup d'état* in securing her position, and only common watchfulness seemed needful to retain it when won. Still, she reviewed the past few months, gathering together all the information she had received from Eve, storing up scraps of knowledge which had been gleaned from simple conversations, against possible contingency.

When she slept at last, it was without dreams; the pure, sweet sleep which it has been claimed Nature sends only to the innocent and care-free. A light, peaceful slumber that did much to restore healthful calm to her disordered nervous system.

She awoke next day experiencing no worse effects than a slight languor, and some irritation from the burns upon the hands. Her face was still inflamed, but the cooling lotions which had been applied were already effecting a cure.

She remained in her room, enjoying the luxury of a cushioned lounging-chair, and of having her comfort accurately studied. Seeing her, one would think that the late lady's maid had known only tender care all her life. Certainly, she possessed to a remarkable degree that faculty of adaptation, which can suit its owner to any sphere.

The trunks were brought during the morning, and at her request were at once conveyed into the room placed at her disposal. The keys had been lost, but were speedily replaced by application to a neighboring blacksmith. Afterward she examined them curiously and marked some of the contents with the design of analyzing them more closely at an early date. Among these were Mr. Frampton's letters to both father and daughter, and papers apparently relating to the captain's business affairs.

Richard Holstead accomplished his mission so successfully that Mr. Frampton presented himself early in the afternoon. Cecil denied him an interview, pleading that she was yet too indisposed, but returned a kindly message to his solicitous inquiries.

He came daily, and was unremitting in his endeavors to relieve the tedium of her seclusion. He sent fresh flowers and choice fruits, together with a miscellany of the best current literature.

"He should make an attentive husband," reflected Cecil; but beyond this she bestowed little thought upon the man whose fate was soon to be linked with hers.

Cecil would not hazard a meeting until her face had regained its ordinary smooth fairness. Then, one morning, she selected from Eve's wardrobe a dress of some black, gauzy material, the crape at her neck fastened by a clasp of jet, and went down to meet Eve Collingsbrooke's betrothed husband.

He started forward to meet her, a tall, broad-shouldered man, bearing full evidence in his appearance of the wear and tear of his fifty years. His hair had been brown, but was now thickly intermixed with gray. He had never been a handsome man, but his rugged features were softened by the kindness of his pleasant eyes, and his face was lined and interlined as much by application to business cares as the flitting of time.

A wide, firm mouth and square jaws evidenced decision of character, and Cecil knew at a glance that he would prove no plastic toy in her hands. He

was a man who could be generous to a fault where his sympathies were enlisted, but one who would never forgive a deliberate injury.

He greeted her with a tenderness which was almost fatherly, and Cecil felt that, had she been really Eve Collingsbrooke, her heart would have gone out to him with grateful reciprocity. As Eve Collingsbrooke's counterpart she was prepared to overrule impulse by the calm weighing of events in her favor.

She had resolved that he should be pleased with her, and knew, when she saw his face light at beholding her, that she had not reckoned amiss.

During that first interview he settled the question which lay uppermost in his mind.

"Your father was my dearest friend, Eve," he said, addressing her by the name she falsely bore, "and I do sincerely mourn with you his loss. It was his intention soon to give you to me, but this late sad event must hasten the time when I shall have a legal right to protect you. You must let me take you to my heart and home at once; let me cherish my little wife; share her sorrow, increase her joy. Shall it not be so, Eve?"

"I am yours," she replied, quietly, "whenever you will."

So it was settled that there should be a quiet marriage ceremony ere long, after which they would return at once to Frampton.

Great trees may be whirled along by the current, yet a little obstacle may change its course by fixed opposition. Such an apparently small stumbling-block was to come in their way, influencing their plans but momentarily at the time, but operating most seriously in the end.

CHAPTER IV. TWO SHADOWS.

THE marriage was fixed to take place in another fortnight. Cecil ordered no trousseau—her mourning would not admit of that—but she made plentiful additions to her wardrobe. Black, as a rule, is unbecoming to most women. But Cecil's fresh complexion was admirably calculated to bear the test of her somber garments; the perfect whiteness of her skin and rose-flushed cheeks were brought into more vivid relief by the strong contrast.

The intervening time was agreeably passed in visiting points of interest about the city. Mr. Frampton was well acquainted with the place in its business sections, but was obliged to apply to Dick Holstead for advice regarding the series of pleasure trips taken in the precincts.

Cecil demurred at first, but when Mr. Frampton insisted with a playful assumption of tyranny, and was seconded by Mrs. Holstead, she made no further objection. It was the object of the others to efface from her mind all painful reflections upon the late catastrophe, and she was glad to be released from the necessity of counterfeiting a grief which she did not feel.

So a light carriage was driven to the door almost daily, and Cecil, in company with her fiance, frequented galleries, libraries, and public drives, but not so persistently as to exhaust their attractions. Once or twice Richard Holstead accompanied them, but the young man was one of the world's workers, and could not often snatch holidays from his occupied time.

He was an architect and a draughtsman, and just now was engaged perfecting the plan of a private residence for a wealthy citizen. If this proved satisfactory, he was to receive the contract for the building. It was a desirable consummation, for the neat little house on Broad street was encumbered by a mortgage which a position as master-builder would ere long give him means of canceling.

Mr. Frampton became warmly interested in the young man. The fact that he had been chiefly instrumental in rescuing Cecil may have first drawn him to young Holstead; but the honest integrity of the latter, his intelligence and industry, soon formed the basis of a friendship which was not destined to fade away as merely a pleasant remembrance.

Two weeks passed speedily, and one pleasant autumn morning there was a private marriage in one of the plainer church edifices. It was Mr. Frampton's desire that the ceremony should be consummated in a church, and Cecil acquiesced, herself indifferent except that the words which would constitute her mistress of Frampton Place should be uttered beyond recall.

She had put off her mourning attire for the occasion. An element of superstition made her shrink from being married in black. Her dress of white India muslin, though of dead fineness, was simply made, and displayed nothing to indicate that it was a bridal robe. Her mantle and bonnet combined simplicity and richness, and would have been equally unmarked by an ordinary observer.

They were accompanied by Dick and Mrs. Holstead, the only other witnesses being the sexton and one or two idlers who lounged in, scenting a marriage from the open church. A passer-by stepped into the porch just as the ceremony was concluded.

He was a slender, sallow-faced man of perhaps thirty years. His hair and eyes were black, his nose aquiline, his lips thin and shaded by a jetty mustache. He was haggard and there were hollow circles about his eyes, yet they did not seem evidences of dissipation. His clothes were shabby but gracefully worn; his slender brown hands carefully kept, and bearing no traces of toil upon them.

He was met at the door by one of the idle spectators mentioned, the latter wandering out again.

"Is it a marriage?" he asked, with the easy familiarity which men, though strangers, can adopt toward each other.

"Yes, but it's over. Another case of May and December, I opine."

"Ah!" The stranger lounged against one of the porch columns, and the other, with his curiosity satisfied, passed out.

There was the sweep of white drapery down the aisle; Mrs. Holstead's best silk rustled its stiff folds audibly, and the little party came out through the doorway. Cecil's hand rested lightly upon the arm of her husband, her eyes were raised to his face as he spoke some low words to her, the nature of which could be easily determined by his proud, fond glance.

The man in the porch turned his gaze toward them listlessly; then, with a start, leaned forward, his face grown eager, his eyes searching the features of the bride with a half-incredulous scrutiny.

Cecil passed without looking toward him. A carriage was waiting, drawn close to the curb. The driver sprung down to open the door as the little party descended the steps leading from the church, closely followed by the dark-faced stranger.

The latter sauntered forward a pace or two as Mr. Frampton handed his new-made wife into the carriage. Then he turned as if about to pass over the crossing, and looking back through the open carriage-door encountered Cecil's gaze. Her lips parted slightly, grew white, her blue eyes dilated, an anguished expression swept over her face.

A procession of some kind was passing through a neighboring street, and at this moment the band attending it struck up a joyous measure. The fiery thoroughbreds were already champing their bits with impatience to be off, and at the unexpected sound they started forward, rearing and plunging wildly.

The driver sprung for their heads and succeeded in grasping them, and a moment later the animals stood cowed and trembling. But quick as he had been, he had not prevented mischief. The man who had taken such apparent interest in the bride was lying now in the center of the street, senseless, dusty, and bleeding. The shaft had struck him upon the shoulder, and the steel-shod hoofs trampled him down. Cecil had not fainted, but she lay back against the cushions so motionless and pale that those seeing her thought she had.

Richard Holstead gave a few rapid directions to the men who came crowding around, then consulted briefly with Mr. Frampton. The latter gentleman turned to Mrs. Holstead, who still stood upon the pavement; the carriage was backed to the curb, and he assisted her into it, himself following. The coachman mounted the box and the carriage rolled away, Dick remaining to take charge of the injured man.

It had been arranged that the newly wedded pair should return to the Holsteeds for a few hours, and take an afternoon train for the bridegroom's home. A whim of Cecil's changed this programme.

Dick came home with the intelligence that the stranger was seriously, if not mortally injured. No one in the crowd identified him, so he had been conveyed immediately to the hospital.

"You will see for me that he lacks no care," said Mr. Frampton, drawing a bank-bill from his wallet. "I can but feel in a measure responsible for his accident. I should like to know that the poor fellow stands a chance of recovering."

"I should like to see him," Cecil said. "Can we not go to the hospital this afternoon?"

"My dear, we would have to obtain passes, and might be detained too late to reach the train."

"Then we can take a later one, or wait until morning," she argued. "Please oblige me, Hugh!"

What husband of an hour can withstand the pleading of his bride? It did not seem strange to Mr. Frampton, himself kindly and sympathetic, that the stranger's disaster should so deeply affect his wife, or that she should so interest herself regarding him. Cecil's will prevailed, and Dick—ever accommodating—volunteered to arrange the preliminaries for the visit to the institution.

They gained access to it during the day. The man lay upon the narrowed bed, his eyes closed, no paining now and then with the pain of his hurts.

He had not been conscious, the nurse said, even when the wounds were dressed. His shoulder was dislocated and his body was badly bruised, but the worst feature of the case was caused by a blow upon his head, the extent of the injury inflicted not yet having been accurately ascertained.

Mr. Frampton, turning from the bedside, was startled at the pallor of his wife's countenance.

"This has proved too shocking a spectacle for you, Eve," he said, self-reproachfully. "I should not have permitted you to come."

"The close air made me faint for a moment," returned Cecil. "Nothing more! See, my nerves are quite steady."

She laid her hand, firm and quiet, upon his. She had learned the lesson of self-control long ago, and had come here prepared for the conviction she yet hoped against. At sound of her voice the sick man's eyes opened with a gleam of consciousness in them, then closed again wearily.

Hours afterward he surprised the nurse by rousing suddenly from his apparent stupor, and making inquiries regarding his afternoon visitors.

Cecil shuddered, and drew her dress close about her as they passed through the long wards. She had no curiosity to witness the different plases of suffering which surrounded her. She averted her gaze from the prostrate forms, the faces outlined against the pillows, some wasted by long illness, others flushed with fever, all bearing some stamp of disease.

Had she been observant she might have noted one, a woman, with dead-blond hair cut close to her head, with face, hands and arms swathed in light bandages. If inquiry had been made, the matron could have told her that No. 19 had been rescued

from the late disastrous conflagration—that her recovery had first seemed impossible, that she had survived the worst crisis and was now tediously mending. But Cecil saw nothing to distinguish that one sufferer from the hosts of others she had passed.

They missed the train they had first proposed taking, but departed later, after taking an affectionate leave of the Holsteads. The latter persons would accept of no remuneration for their kindness to Cecil, and parted from her with real regret. The little house on Broad street seemed dull after she had gone; the inmates missed the fair, bright face from among them.

It was late in the afternoon of the following day that the Frampton carriage at the village depot met the home-coming master and his bride. Mr. Frampton had telegraphed the date of his marriage and immediate return. Frampton Place had been agitated beyond its usual custom by hurried preparations for their reception.

The gray-haired coachman, standing by his sleek, well-fed steeds, touched his hat with smiling deference, and some respectful, congratulatory expressions.

"Thank you, Giles, my good fellow!" Mr. Frampton returned, heartily. "Yes, this is a glad day for me. And now, how are they all at the house—is Miss Olive quite well?"

"Yes, sir; all well, sir, except Mrs. Blodgett's neuralgia, and Emmy's headaches, which are both about as before, sir."

"Very well. Home at once, Giles!"

Bowling over the smooth road, Cecil roused up from her weary apathy to obtain a first glimpse of her future home. It was a fertile, level stretch of country, broken by clumps of forest growth, alternating with cultivated fields. The village they had left was scarcely a mile distant from Frampton Place.

The carriage turned from the highway into an avenue which formed a circuitous course through the grounds. The house itself was so embowered in trees and shrubs, that only imperfect glimpses of it could be obtained until quite nearly approached.

"Almost there," said Mr. Frampton, with the eagerness of one who delights in home comforts. "I hope you will love Olive, Eve. The child's early life was not happy as it should have been, and I fear even Frampton Place has been dull for her. It will be different with you there."

"I don't fear but we shall prove friends," Cecil said, smiling upon him. To herself she remarked:

"He thinks too much of that child; of course she is petted and spoiled by his indulgence. I'll have her sent away to school, I think."

Her husband had spoken often of his niece and ward, Olive Tremaine. She was the child of an only sister, many years younger than himself, who married much against the wishes of her family. The marriage was not a happy one. The husband, disappointed at finding his wife's fortune secured to her in such a manner that he could not gain possession of it, soon grew negligent and abusive. He was a spendthrift and a gambler, and the wild life he led kept his wife in a state of constant anxiety for his safety.

He was brought home one day, shot in a fracas in which he had been a participant. Mrs. Tremaine did not long survive him, and dying, left her one child to Hugh Frampton's guardianship.

The carriage drew up before the entrance.

"Welcome home, my wife!" Mr. Frampton exclaimed, lifting her out and conducting her into the hall where the servants, headed by the housekeeper, awaited them. With a few kind words to all, he hurried her past up the stairway to the apartments prepared for her.

"I know you are tired, my dear," he said. "Ah, here is Olive."

Cecil had expected to find in her husband's niece a mere child. Instead, she met a girl matured in early womanhood, self-possessed and accomplished as a thorough course under the best instructors could render her.

"I am prepared to like you," she said to Cecil, laughingly. "Uncle Hugh's wife has been so long in contemplation, that you have seemed to occupy an imaginary place in the household, which your coming will agreeably fill."

So Cecil was actually installed mistress of Frampton Place.

CHAPTER V.

THE ADVERTISEMENT.

FRAMPTON House was a rambling old building, incongruous in its combination of stone, brick and framework. It had been in possession of the family for generations back, and came to the present owner from an uncle whose name he bore. Besides this inheritance he had amassed an enviable fortune in trade, and, having retired from active business, came here to spend the remainder of his days in the enjoyment of the emoluments he had gained.

The house for the greater part was gloomy and antiquated. It was originally an oblong stone structure, with massive jail-like walls, and narrow windows, let in high up from the floor. As the elder branches of the family increased, or their inclinations prompted, additions had been made to this. First had been a long frame projection containing two suites of rooms, flanking each side of a narrow passageway. Then a front of brick which had been considered a triumph of masonry in its day; and from this wings and porches had been extended, until, at last, the original structure was left far in the rear.

The grounds about were extensive and cleanly kept, but without other ornamentation than velvety greensward and dense foliage.

The question of improvements had latterly been

agitated by the inmates of the place. Partitions were to be torn down, bay windows and verandas to supersede the deep dark porches; halls and staircases to be widened; folding doors, plate glass, cornice, panelings and gilt, all were to work in the proposed transformation.

The opportunity recalled to Mr. Frampton, the chance of requiting a debt of gratitude. Accordingly he wrote to Richard Holstead, proffering him the supervision of the work at a liberal rate.

Eight months had passed since the date our story opens. It was a morning in the late spring-time, and the trees about the place were in their gala-dress of newly opened leaves. A few days more would change them thick and dark, but as yet they were of the vivid green which is transparent when the sun shines through, displaying all the intricate tracery of delicate fibers. The ivy which clambered over the older portions of the house, though an evergreen, looked fresher and more glossy under the influence of dewy nights, and bright, sunny days.

The family of Frampton Place were seated at the breakfast-table. The room was long and low, with oak wainscoting blackened by age, and was lined on one side with china closets and stationary sideboards. One end was almost filled by a huge old-fashioned fire-place, closed now for the summer, which was overtopped by a massive oaken mantle-piece. Windows and doors crowded another side, and the remaining end gave access to a square from which passage-ways branched in different directions. The hangings and carpet were crimson, the furniture heavy oak, well in keeping with the apartment.

In summer-time the sun shining in through the opened windows, and in winter the ruddy blaze upon the hearth, gave it an air of cheerfulness from which the darkened walls and lowering ceiling could not detract.

Mrs. Frampton had already put aside her deep mourning. She was arrayed now in a plain white wrapper, with an edging of black at the throat and wrists. Ever and anon, as the desultory conversation flagged, her husband glanced at her with proud, loving eyes. He had grown to idolize her, and she was quite content to be the "old man's darling."

Olive Tremaine, quietly discussing her toast and coffee, looked scarcely younger than the mistress of Frampton Place, the difference of a half-dozen years was so easily scored by their contrasting styles.

Olive at eighteen, with a well-developed figure and stature above the medium, with complexion, eyes and hair of dusky richness, had gained the easy carriage which belongs to maturer years.

The silence of a moment which had settled upon the little group was broken by the entrance of a servant with the morning mail. Mr. Frampton distributing the letters, afterward turned to the examination of his own correspondence.

"Holstead accepts," he remarked, refolding a sheet he had perused. "He'll be here in a day or so. I'm heartily glad, for I would rather trust the job with him than in other hands."

"I cannot rid myself of a feeling of obligation to the Holsteads," Mrs. Frampton said. "Perhaps we can repay their kindness in a measure now."

"The young man must feel himself as one of us," her husband replied. "You will see to it, I know, Eve, and you, Olive, must put aside social distinctions for the time, and act with us on the basis of democratic equality."

Olive Tremaine had the prejudices of an aristocrat. It was not that she shrank from the poorer classes on account of their poverty, but she had full faith in the supremacy of "blood" and high breeding. She looked up now a little haughtily.

"It is your right to command in your own house, uncle Hugh. I think I have never forgotten the civility due any guest of yours, but I shall not descend from my own proper social sphere to equalize myself even with this prime favorite of yours."

But Mr. Frampton was already buried in the depths of the morning paper and consequently in oblivion to all else; His wife, from indolence or disinclination, did not take up the gantlet for the Holsteads, and Olive's speech remained unheeded.

The gentleman had followed word for word the sentiments contained in the leading article; and was turning to local items, when a prominent paragraph under the head of "Personal" caught his eye. He glanced at it, rubbed his glasses, and read it carefully through, then dropped his paper with an ejaculatory:

"Bless me!"
Mrs. Frampton remained indifferent; Olive looked up inquiringly.

"Bless me!" repeated Mr. Frampton, gazing with some surprise at the former. "This must be meant for you, Eve!"

Raising the paper he read:

"If the daughter of Captain Edward Collingsbrooke, formerly of Berkshire, England, and who embarked for the United States in the ship *Phoenix*, June, 18—, will apply at the office of the undersigned, she will learn something very much to her advantage."

JOHN CHANTRY,

"Attorney and Solicitor, 17—st., N. Y. City."

"It must be meant for you, Eve," he repeated, as if the reiteration should draw from her some explanation of the paragraph.

"Evidently," she replied, extending her hand for the paper. "It is very strange—I cannot understand it. Who can be so desirous to communicate with me that such an agency should be employed?"

"Some of your relatives, perhaps," suggested her husband.

"Scarcely," replied Cecil, slowly, mentally con-

sidering the statistics she had stored up regarding the Collingsbrookes. "Poor Captain Collingsbrooke's daughter could excite no interest in the minds of his titled kinsfolk."

"Well, what do you wish done about it, my dear?"

"I suppose somebody must ascertain what it all means. I don't know but I shall go to the city myself; not that I attach much importance to this mysterious hint of something to my advantage, but the trip will tally with some shopping which I wish to do."

"Just as you think best, Eve. I will accompany you when you wish."

The subject was dropped then. Cecil felt a vague uneasiness, and pored over the advertisement when she was alone, but there was nothing in its stereotyped wording to afford her a clew. She felt almost tempted to let it pass without a response, but such a course would excite the wonderment of her husband. After all, she thought, she had gained the wealth and position she had coveted beyond fear of losing them. Nothing could wrest them from her even should seemingly improbable exposure come.

Nothing? Cecil told herself so, resolutely. Yet a thought crept up which made her shiver as with a chill. What was it? Some skeleton of her past which would not lie buried—a ghost that sometimes defied her power to exercise.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FOWLER AND THE SNAKE.

MR. FRAMPTON had gone out. Olive was in the music-room diligently practicing. Mrs. Frampton had made her toilet and was sitting down to some bit of ornamental needlework, when a servant came to her with a card.

"Victor D'Arno," she read. "I think I cannot know him. It is probably Mr. Frampton he desires to see."

"No, madam, he inquired particularly for you."

Marveling much, Cecil glanced in the mirror after the fashion of pretty women, married or single, and went to meet her guest. He stood by one of the windows, half concealed by the falling curtains, but turned quickly at the sound of the opening door.

Cecil came in with the easy assurance of a cultivated woman. Midway across the floor she stopped, her hands clasping in the nervous fashion which had also belonged to Eve Collingsbrooke, her eyes dilating and color fading as she gazed fixedly at him.

A slender man with pale, olive skin and close-cut, jetty hair, his face smoothly shaven, his eyes dark, with accurately penciled brows. His dress was plain, but of fine material and fashionably made. A costly ring gleamed upon his finger, but with this exception he wore no jewelry.

Much changed indeed, but the same face which Cecil had last seen blanched and drawn with pain, pressed against the pillow of the hospital bed. The man, who, shabby and haggard, had watched her from the church upon her marriage-day.

Cecil opened her lips, but her voice sounded harsh and strained.

"You?" she said. "Why have you come to me?"

He came forward, smiling.

"I am glad you are not inclined to use ceremony toward me, Mrs. Frampton. Will you not welcome me for the sake of old remembrances?"

"Are you trying to sting me," she demanded, with a pitiful look on her white face. "Don't you know that I blotted out all of my old existence when I began this?"

"Is it then so satisfying?"

Her lips twitched painfully, then some latent pride arose, enabling her to look him steadily in the face.

"Yes," she said, "I have all I either desired or hoped. I have been quite content."

"Have been," he repeated, his eyes seeking hers with a magnetic force which would not be evaded.

"Will it be different now?"

"Why should it be?" she asked, but her fingers locked themselves in a strained clasp. The man's power over her whatever it may have been, was not extinct. She felt it, struggled against it, yet knew herself helpless before him.

"Because you cannot forget the past, Cecil. Because, seeing me, you can not cheat yourself into the belief that you have any affection for your doting old husband."

"I put love away from me once," she replied, her voice quietly monotonous now. "It wounded me, so I said I would never love again. My husband is very kind and I respect him. I would not have it otherwise."

"But wounds heal," he said, significantly. "It was never my fault, Cecil!"

"Was it not? Ah, well! Tell me what you want, and then go. It is better that we do not see each other."

A kind of triumph flashed across his face.

"Then you are not indifferent, as you would have me think," he said, softly. "Is there danger that the old ties prove more binding than the new?"

Could he know the pain that was wringing her heart beneath all her quietness of manner, and was he purposely striving to augment it?

"You taught me how worthless those ties were," she said, bitterly. "I had no claim on you then; you can not assert one now."

"How do you know that? You would not be the first woman who has been misled by a malicious tale. You placed faith in the first trumped-up story which was rehearsed to you rather than in me. The blind passion of jealousy did the rest."

She had been quiet and pale before. Now every

nerve was rigidly strained, her lips scarcely moved as she spoke breathlessly.

"In the face of all our past, can you tell me that it was not true?"

His eyes, which had held their mastery over her, fell before her gaze. He hesitated, half turned away, then faced her again.

"Yes, it was true," he said, doggedly, "else I would not be here. But I am free of that woman now, Cecil; she is dead."

She made no remark upon his words. She had been sitting, but rose now, steadyng herself with her hand upon the chair.

"Is that all?" she asked, coldly. "I must beg you will excuse me."

"No; it is not all. Sit down again, Cecil. I have come to you because I hold your secret, for the keeping of which you must render me a service. You know me of old—I am not easily deterred from the accomplishment of an object. I want the aid which you will not refuse me."

He paused, but she motioned him to proceed.

"I want you to introduce me into your husband's house. Any pretext will do; old friendship, consanguinity, if you please, or services rendered in the past. These Americans are delightfully unsuspicious."

"Oh, no; never that!" she cried. "You must never come here—we must not meet again."

He studied her silently for a moment, then asked:

"Could anything induce you to leave all you have gained—affluence, position, security—to take up our Bohemian life again?"

Two red spots flamed into her whitened cheeks.

"I would have done it once," she said, still keeping her voice toned to non-committal monotony. "I would have done for you any thing you could have asked. But that time is gone forever."

"Then it is best that we understand each other fully. You know what my fortunes were before; it is the same still; one day on an equality with the highest, *feted*, lionized; the next penniless, not knowing from whence even common necessities are to come. I am wearied of this varied existence. Your husband has a niece who is young, beautiful, wealthy. You married for money; why should not I profit by your example?"

She comprehended his meaning slowly. It was a moment before she asked.

"You would marry Olive? Is that what you would intimate?"

"That is it, Cecil!"

He was watching her furtively. She turned away and walked to the further extremity of the room. When she came back there were purple marks in the palms of her hands, where the nails had pressed into the flesh; her face was brilliant with excited color; her eyes scintillating like a phosphorescent sea.

"You dare tell me this? You dare ask me to aid you in it? Do you know what it has cost me to speak thus calmly of the past, which I had banished from my thoughts, lest I should go mad in remembering it? If you have regard for the weal of either of us, go now; and never attempt to consummate your project. Remember what desperation drove me to before; if I attempt the same again, I will not fail."

"His eyes seeking hers fixedly, again subdued their angry light; the shadow of a smile curved his mouth as he replied:

"Remember, too, how the blow which was aimed at my life recoiled upon you. I never abandoned a purpose, Cecil, and never will while I live. It will be useless for you to combat against me."

She was yielding already to the subtle influence he exerted over her. He saw it, and continued:

"Your own act has placed an impassable barrier between us. What might have been is impossible now. Your reason will advise you better when you have thought of this, for you are in my power, utterly. What do you think would the owner of Frampton Place say if informed that his wife, instead of coming from gentle stock, was only a waif thrown nameless upon the world? What if he knew that before he took her to himself she had been a wife in all except the name?"

She threw up her hands with a low, sharp cry.

"You dare not taunt me with that," she exclaimed, passionately. "You cannot transfer your perfidy to me!"

"I am only showing you how the world would view it, Cecil. You know the man you have married; would he forgive the deception you have practiced upon him?"

She cowered at that. Hugh Frampton, generous as she had found him, would be relentless in his wrath.

"You must do as I wish, Cecil. There is no alternative."

Olive's step was on the stair, her voice penetrated the closed door as she passed it, humming a snatch of song. Cecil, pressing her hands to her face, with an effort became calm.

"You must go, now," she said. "We may be interrupted at any moment."

"And your decision?"

"What choice have I?" she demanded. "You conquer as you ever have done."

He accepted his triumph quietly. He had been assured of it from the first. He left her after a hasty appointment for another meeting, when there should be no danger of intrusion.

Cecil fled away to her room, and remained there locked in for an hour. She came down when her husband returned, slightly pale, a little languid, and complained of a headache. That was all!

CHAPTER VII.

TWO MEN IN THE HOUSE.

A couple of days later Mr. and Mrs. Frampton went together to the city, and during their sojourn

there called at No. 17 — street. The former had volunteered to attend to the business—whatever it might be—alone, but a mixed feeling of restlessness and curiosity would not permit Cecil to remain behind.

It was a bright afternoon which would have been pleasant in the country, but the sun beating down against brick walls and pavements made it almost intolerably warm within the city limits. They drove to the place in a private carriage, and leaving it at the door, entered.

The office of Mr. Chantry in no way differed from that of any prosperous lawyer. The outer room was large and bare, with two or three clerks' desks ranged against the walls; the clerks themselves, pale, preoccupied-looking men, seldom breaking silence by aught save the scratching of their pens or the ruling of paper. An inner room furnished with carpet, table, chairs and escritoire, was where the lawyer received his clients. Into this, accordingly, Mr. and Mrs. Frampton was shown.

Mr. Chantry, a middle-aged man with a slight stoop in his shoulders and a lank, sallow countenance which ordinarily betrayed no more expression than a piece of blank parchment, placed himself immediately at their service.

Mr. Frampton introduced himself and wife and made known their business.

"This lady Captain Collingsbrooke's daughter," said the lawyer, passing the palm of one hand slowly over the back of the other and regarding Cecil attentively. "Of course you have proofs of identity?"

"Yes," Cecil replied, promptly, opening the ornated reticule she carried. "I thought such might be required, and came prepared with authentic documents."

These consisted of a certificate of marriage between Captain Collingsbrooke and Eleanor, daughter of Adam Montague; a paper certifying the birth of their one child, Eve Collingsbrooke; and articles denoting the captain's former position in the queen's army, together with private letters from men well known in London.

Very satisfactory, Mr. Chantry declared them.

"And now, madam," said he, "I must congratulate you upon your succession to the famed Collingsbrooke diamonds, entailed in a bequest almost a century ago to the female descendants of that direct branch of the house. Are you acquainted with the contents of the will executed by Lady Collingsbrooke, Dowager Countess of Evrehampton, your great-grandmother?"

"I am not," Cecil replied. "There was little communication between my father and his family. If he was aware of the contents of the document to which you allude, he never referred to it to my knowledge."

"Briefly, then, this is the story," began the lawyer. "Lady Collingsbrooke was the mother of five children, four sons and a daughter, your grandfather being a younger son. The diamonds were bequeathed to the Lady Sarah to be transmitted to her eldest female child, or failing such, to the eldest female descendant of the son, claiming precedence in birth, who should be so blessed."

"The Lady Sarah died unmarried, and the jewels reverted to Lady Nora, only daughter of the Earl of Evrehampton. Of the two remaining brothers of your grandfather, one died a bachelor, the other leaving no child. The Lady Nora married and was the mother of several children, male and female, but all died during their childhood. Her brother, the present earl, has no daughter, and Lady Nora's recent decease leaves you the only female descendant of the house, and consequently the diamonds fall to your reversion."

"They are a legacy worthy a representative of that noble line, and I am happy to be instrumental in placing them in your possession. At present they are held by the London firm for whom I am acting, but the only delay will be the necessary time consumed in submitting these proofs of your identity. After that the gems will be immediately forwarded."

"Again let me congratulate you, Mrs. Frampton."

Cecil had followed him closely through this explanation, during which he had dropped the lawyer's technicalities of speech.

"Thank you," she said, quietly. "My good fortune is as agreeable as unexpected."

There was some consultation after that, and then Cecil and her husband left the lawyer's office to be driven back to their hotel.

Meantime we return to Frampton House. Olive was alone with the exception of the servants. She was in her own room trifling over some articles of bijouterie scattered upon her toilet-table, when, after tapping at the door, Emmy Brown, who did double service as upper parlor-maid and lady's attendant, entered. She was a willing, tidy girl, who had been long in the service of Mr. Frampton, and was much valued by the household.

She was pale and heavy-eyed, and moved listlessly.

"What is the matter, Emmy?" queried Olive, kindly. "You look quite ill."

"It's my head again, Miss Olive. I'm afraid I'm about to have one of my worst spells. If you can spare me, Mrs. Blodgett says that she will see that Dolly gets through with the work; I'd like to go home for a couple of days until I am over it. I can't do much when I've one of my headaches, but I'll come back whenever you like."

Emmy's severe headaches had always been a subject of compassion for Olive, and the required permission was readily granted.

"Certainly, you shall go, Emmy, and do not return until you are entirely well. I will go down this afternoon to see how you are."

"Oh, thank you, Miss Olive; you are very kind."

said Emmy, gratefully. "Somehow my mother can always keep down the pain best. She'll be glad to see you at the cottage."

"My only regret will be that it is your affliction will take me there," replied Miss Tremaine. "You need not wait, Emmy; go before the greatest heat of the day."

She did not forget her promise. As it drew near evening she placed a few delicacies in a small basket, and set out on her self-appointed mission.

Mrs. Brown's cottage was just beyond the boundary of Frampton Place, away from the public road, but between the house and the village. It was a pleasant walk through grassy by-lanes, skirting meadows and fields of grain luxuriant in their emerald growth.

She found Emmy suffering acute nervous pain, but the cool quiet of the shaded room, aided by Mrs. Brown's bitter herbs, promised speedier relief than could have been secured at Frampton House.

Olive did not linger long, and returning took a path which for some distance stretched through a thinly wooded tract, and led more directly homeward than the way she had come.

Midway ran a narrow, sluggish stream, which was the outlet of a small lake that went by the name of the Pool. The banks were fringed with osiers and it was bridged at the narrowest point by a railed foot-walk, old and rickety, and little used of late. There was a narrow bridge some distance below, but to cross it would have taken her out of the direct way. The footplank swayed beneath her light weight, but, apprehending no danger, she went confidently forward.

In the midst of the stream had been a miniature pier supporting the frail structure where the lengths of the plank joined. This had long given symptoms of decay, and now, as Olive neared it, the insecure pile gave way. The timbers, left unsupported, swayed and creaked dismally, then went down with a crash.

She caught at one of the upright posts which secured the railing, which, fortunately, did not give way. The stream, though not wide, was deep, and with a slimy black mud at the bottom. She was there in the midst of it, clinging to an insecure support, and communication with either shore cut completely off. At best, it was an unenviable position, but relief was at hand.

A young man following the path she had just traversed, came in sight at the instant of the disaster. Comprehending all at a glance, he sprung forward, and throwing aside his coat and boots, dove into the water.

He swam to her refuge-place, reaching her side before she had recovered herself sufficiently to cry out for help.

"Put your hand upon my shoulder," he said. "There, I will steady you! Now trust yourself to me, and we will be ashore in a moment."

With his arm circling her waist, he struck out with the other for the bank, and in a couple of minutes they had the firm earth under their feet.

She turned to him with grateful thanks, but catching a quizzical glimmer in his eyes, and surveying their two dripping figures, laughed merrily over the ludicrous aspect of the *contretemps*,

"Then you are neither frightened nor hurt," he said, quietly resuming his cast-off garments, "I am glad of that."

"You have suffered equally with me," she replied, quickly restraining her mirth. "But for your timely assistance I would not have readily escaped. You must let me make amends for the inconvenience I have caused you, by accompanying me to the house, where you shall be provided with dry garments, and such hospitality as I can offer in the absence of my uncle."

"Thanks! If you allude to Frampton House that is my destination. I am Richard Holstead."

Olive was surprised. He was very unlike the rough-spoken men she had individualized as comprising the working class; and this encounter had broken down the barriers of formality she would otherwise have interposed between them. She was too well-bred to betray her thoughts as they went together to the house.

She remembered her uncle's injunction, but found that it required no effort to regard Richard Holstead as the equal of the gentlemen with whom she had associated in her own "sphere." She was already beginning to learn that intelligence and refinement are not incompatible with honest labor.

During the time which intervened before Mr. Frampton's return, she accompanied the young architect through the building, explaining the alterations which had been decided upon. He set to work at once, drafting plans and suggesting such changes as his more practical knowledge deemed expedient.

"This part," Olive said, passing by the heavy door which led into the oldest portion of the house, "uncle has decided not to touch. He has too much veneration for the early homestead to pull it down, and I think the same reason pleads as forcibly against its renovation as the fact that the house is amply roomy without it."

"Its existence lends a romantic interest to the place," Dick remarked. "The ivy-covered walls and moss-grown roof form a pleasant feature when viewed from a distance; and practically, it would be a difficult, as well as expensive, matter to reduce it to our notions of modern comfort."

For the rest, Olive found herself admiring the quick comprehension which decided at a glance the feasibility of the proposed changes, which pointed out the advantages or defects appertaining to them. He possessed the soul of an artist, together with the faculty of utilizing effects which belongs to the practical workman. The combination of the two

established a happy medium between beauty without usefulness and vice versa.

With the return of Mr. Frampton the actual work began. Half a score of brawny, stout-limbed mechanics plied their tools within the house, embodying in the result of their handiwork the creations of the one master-brain.

Within a fortnight of the same date Victor D'Arno was established at Frampton House. He came as the avowed *protégé* of Captain Collingsbrooke in earlier years, and as one who, by an important service rendered to the father, through it possessed a claim to the gratitude of the daughter. It is not to be understood that he intruded upon this assumption.

He had taken quiet lodgings in the village, and made it appear that an incidental meeting with Cecil and her husband first informed him of his proximity to an early associate. The rest Cecil's own tact, and Mr. Frampton's desire to show regard to his wife's friend, accomplished.

It was even with a show of reluctance that D'Arno, yielding to the cordial invitation of the latter, consented to take up his abode in the house at such a time, lest his presence should incommod the family while various portions of the building were undergoing repairs. But the spacious old dwelling, with its wings and projections, left ample room for the accommodation of all, and the leisure of the household was by no means infringed upon by the labor being accomplished beneath the roof.

And in the elegant *personnel* of Mrs. Frampton's friend, neither her husband nor young Holstead recognized the shabby stranger who fell the victim of disaster upon Cecil's marriage day.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SLAVE OF THE NEEDLE.

It was growing late in a fervid summer afternoon, but the blinding glare of sunlight, beating back from slate roofs across the way, reflected its sultry heat into the upper room, where a slight, fair girl sat bending over her work.

Changed, indeed, since we saw her last upon the eve of the conflagration, wherein she was supposed to have perished, yet it was Eve Collingsbrooke in the flesh.

She had been rescued from the burning building by one of the courageous men who battled the fire-fight to the last as it closed in about its human victims. Awakened by the tumult, the crackling of the flames, and the suffocating heat, she had sprung up from her bed to find herself enveloped in a cloud of smoke, which strangled and bewildered her. She made a few vague efforts to reach the door, but failing, staggered back to the couch and fell upon it in a dead faint.

It was a merciful unconsciousness. It spared her the agony of the great peril encompassing her, the groans and shrieks of those perishing near her.

A fireman, penetrating further than any of his fellows, broke into her room and snatched her senseless form from what had threatened to be her last resting-place. The brave fellow almost forfeited his own life as the penalty of his daring; his retreat seemed cut off by the rapid progress of the flames.

But he fought his way through all, desperately. He tottered out into the open air with his helpless burden clasped close in his arms, both terribly burned, but not beyond recovery.

Among other nameless ones, Eve had been conveyed to the hospital. Her injuries were slow to heal, and, fever setting in, she had lain for weeks wavering between life and death. Her young, healthy vitality conquered in the end, and she went out in the world alone, friendless, homeless.

Her life lay a desolate path before her who had been always tenderly nurtured. She ascertained beyond doubt that her father had perished on that terrible night, but the bitterness of her grief was broken in upon by the necessity for action which her destitution forced upon her.

Their only income had been a life annuity settled upon her father. This fact had increased his anxiety to see her placed beyond fear of want as Hugh Frampton's wife.

But Eve, separated from this consummation by a dreary lapse of months and the absence of the motive power which had urged her to it—she did not know of that other barrier interposed now—had no inclination to forward the accomplishment of that old understanding by her own effort. The same intuition which told her that this chain of events had severed the bond existing between them, also caused her to shrink from applying to Hugh Frampton for aid in her extremity.

She believed that Cecil also had perished. Utterly alone and in a land of strangers, unused alike to privation and to exerting her own energies, Eve took up her stand amid the multitude who do battle for the necessities of life, in a great city.

She was skilled in embroidery, and succeeded in obtaining regular work. But her utmost efforts could no more than sustain her beyond the pale of actual want.

The room in which she sat was small, and meagrely stocked with only dispensable articles of furniture. She was thin and pale yet, from long prostration. Her heavy blonde hair had been shorn close, and in its stead now had come a growth glinted and waving about her neck, making her seem more youthful than before, despite the shadows lingering in her eyes and the hollow traceries depicted in her face. A single cicatrized mark upon her temple, and almost concealed by her waving hair, scarred her face; but upon her throat and wrists, not wholly hidden by the close-fitting dress she wore, were other and plainer evidences of the peril she had passed.

She raised her head wearily but without letting fall her hands with the nearly-finished work. A

heavy step toiling up the bare wooden stairway, paused at her door. A tap, answered by her low-voiced "Come in!" was followed by the entrance of the stout, ruddy-faced Irishwoman who was her landlady.

"Mrs. Mulrooney!" said Eve, in some surprise, rising to place a chair.

"Yis, shure it's mesilf, mem, an' an' awful thramp it is, too, up thin same sthairs. It's tuk the breath out of me complately, it has. How ye sthand it comin' up an' down is more than I can say at all."

"It's not from choice that I occupy such a high station," Eve returned, with a faint smile.

"It's the same I said to Norah, shure. Sez I, the young leddy'll not sthand in the way of a betther offer whin like enough she'll be plazed to take other quarthers. An' sez I, it's the use of the spare bed in me own room I'll be beginn' of her to accipt till she finds other lodgin's, an' she wilcome to it as the blissid air she br'athes.

"It's that, mem, which brought me up to say yez the day, for it's a-wantin' of the room at onct that the gentleman is; an' sez I, the leddy'll take my bed instil of a warnin' whin she knows of the chance. I mighn't have been so bowld to ax it of yez but for me throuble, an' poor little Patsy that's down with the fever, to say nothin' of hard times an' the rise in mates of late."

From sheer lack of breath Mrs. Mullrooney paused; and Eve, gathering the pith from her flow of words, approached at once to the point.

"You want me to give up my room without the customary warning?"

"It's that, mem. The gentleman is own cousin to me lodger on the nixt floor an' for the sake of bein' wid his own kin won't sthand for the matther of a quarther extra on the rint. It's the accommodation I'm axin' of yez."

"To be sure. I could keep the apartment only a fortnight after your expressed desire to retain it, and the kindness you have shown me forbids such a return when your interests are better served otherwise. I must accept your offer to share your chamber if you have no vacant apartment suited to my use until I can procure such elsewhere."

"The blessin' of the widdy an' the orphian be wid yez. It's sorry I am to part wid yer like, an' if yez can give me surety of yer sthayin' for good, it's yerself shall kape the room forby the extra quarther, an' me lodger's cousin. It's the onscanty of yer wantin' to sthay, mem, more'n all the rist."

"I fear that I canot give you that assurance, Mrs. Mulrooney, much as I should like to do so."

Plain and inconvenient as the apartment was, Eve had already more than once been driven to contemplate a removal to a cheaper domicile.

Profuse in her expressions of regret that Eve should be subjected to any inconvenience, and gratitude for her ready compliance with the request made, the really kind-hearted Irishwoman took her departure.

Eve applied herself with renewed diligence to the work which she had not relinquished even during the presence of her visitor; and for an hour scarcely raised her eyes from the groundwork of fine linen on which her needle had upraised an exquisite design of bud, and vine, and flower. The last stitch was taken while the glare of the declining sunlight yet beat into the little room. Then she rose, and donning hat and vail, took the roll of completed work and went out upon the street.

The sidewalks lay in shadow now, and were thronged by the business population hurrying homeward after the completion of their laboring hours. Eve quickened her steps, taking little note of the thousand expressions reflected in the tide of faces floating past, which once it would have delighted her to dwell upon. So much does participation in the actualities of life take from us our inclination to throw the garb of romance over its rougher phases.

The walk was not a long one, and she entered a bazaar where dainty trimmings hung out their enticing insignia to tempt luxurious feminine tastes. A clerk coming forward greeted her courteously, and receiving the roll from her hand, left her waiting while he disappeared into some obscure recess of the establishment. He returned again shortly, with a similar package not yet secured with wrapping and cord.

"Your work gives entire satisfaction," he said, affably. "So much that Mr. Blair is induced to employ you on a companion-piece, though opposed to his former resolution. The season is so dull that no more embroidery will be given out after this, and it is only on condition that you can complete the work by Saturday that it is wanted. There'll be no difficulty I hope."

"The pattern is very intricate, and the time short," Eve ventured, her heart sinking at the prospect his words foretold. "Did you say it is the last I shall have?"

"For the present, yes, miss. Hope to see you on our list again when business is brisker. Mr. Blair mentioned the same, in fact, which is quite a compliment to your skill, I assure you, miss."

He deftly twirled the fabrics he had unrolled into shape again, and looking about him, seized upon a torn newspaper in which to inclose it. Still Eve lingered.

"Can you recommend me to another establishment, meanwhile?" she asked. "It is of the utmost importance that I procure uninterrupted employment."

"Sorry," he returned, "but the fact is dealers in our line are all overstocked. We'll recommend you willingly, of course; but I am afraid it will be of no use. I'll manage that you shall see Mr. Blair himself on Saturday, if you wish; maybe he can suggest something."

Thanking the friendly clerk, Eve dropped her vail,

and turned away with a despondent heart-ache growing upon her. She could see that the vague hope offered was but the feint of a kindness which shrunk from inflicting an unpleasant conviction in its sharpest form. Wearily she toiled up the long stairways. The late sunset cast a dull red glow upon the opposite roofs, and, fatigued as she was, she sat down by the window to begin her task by that remnant of waning light.

The roll of snowy linen lay upon her lap, when a breath of air floating down over the housetops, caught at and fluttered the paper not wholly removed from it. She put her hand down upon the rustling fragment, and her glance following it, rested upon her own name, printed in conspicuous characters. It was the same advertisement which Mr. Frampton had stumbled across weeks before. Eve devoured it with eager eyes, but its object was no more apparent to her than it had proved to the woman who had usurped her identity.

Yet it came to her a message all the more welcome for being unexpected. It was like a bridge connecting her happy, care-free past with this existence so drearily hopeless, so loveless that it seemed scarcely worthy of the continuous struggle required to sustain it, and stretching beyond into the promise of a brighter future.

The commonplace wording of the paragraph awoke in her a tide of rushing recollections. It carried her back to the home in which her childhood had been passed, with all its associations of tender memories.

It recalled the voyage which promised to be the prelude to a newer and wider sphere of life; the days loitered away in the erratic wandering which Captain Collingsbrooke had preferred to following the circumscribed routes grown familiar to tourists. Then the sudden blotting out of all that was fair before her; the loss of the single great affection she had ever known; the blind groping with her scarce recognized grief during the time when her physical suffering deadened her sense of mental pain, and after that the realization of utter loneliness, which is the most desolate of all the bitter destinies a young life can know.

She roused herself from the reverie into which she had fallen to contemplate the new consideration thus thrust upon her. She recognized the difficulties she would be called upon to surmount before proving the degree in which this summons could affect her.

Unlike the majority of English girls, she was familiar with the geography of our country, and less reliant upon herself, dreaded the solitary journey to New York. She might have written, it is true, but this indefinite promise seemed to resolve itself into something tangible luring her on.

She drew out her well-worn portemonnaie and quickly observed its contents. There was only the modicum she had received that day for her completed work—only enough to meet her expenses for the week. She clasped her hands in her old way when anything troubled her, and leant her forehead down upon them against the window-sill.

A sensation of pain, unnoticed for a moment, the aggravation of her flesh pressing against the sharp points of a heavy ring she wore, brought to her like a flash the solution of her most pressing difficulty. Her rings, the sole possession she retained which accorded with her former position, opened up the avenue which had seemed closed against her.

Norah came by and by with a request that she should assume the occupancy of the place assigned her; and Eve, gathering up the untouched work which had fallen to the floor, gave some directions regarding the disposition of her few effects, and followed the girl to Mrs. Mulrooney's chamber.

It was a large, neat room, with beds ranged closely along one side, and was the sleeping apartment of the widow and her five children. Being well ventilated, the prospect was less uninviting than might be supposed.

That evening as she plied her needle by the light of the kerosene lamp which shed its illumination for the divers occupants, she explained to her good-natured landlady the import of the advertisement addressed to her, and the resolution she had taken.

Mrs. Mulrooney entered heartily into the brighter anticipations which Eve had indulged, and, moreover, proffered her services in a most acceptable manner.

She assumed the task of disposing of Eve's rings, and on the following day took them to a jeweler whom she chanced to know. After much haggling she secured a price which, though below their real value, was greater than Eve had hoped to realize.

Eve's task grew less burdensome when it was no longer a work of actual necessity, or perhaps the newly-awakened hope lightened the drudgery. On Saturday she carried back to the store her last piece of work, and received Mr. Blair's assurance that more of its kind was not then attainable. But this fact was not now of vital moment to her.

The Sabbath day she passed quietly. Early in the week—her few requisite preparations occupied but little time in their accomplishment—she took regretful leave of the humble friend she had found in her landlady, and fairly embarked upon her journey.

CHAPTER IX.

GROPPING HER WAY.

THE second day after this witnessed Eve's arrival in New York. It was close upon evening, and she was much fatigued, having traveled without stoppages by the way. Her first consideration was to find a respectable hotel where the charges should not exceed her limited means, and refresh herself as best she might before proceeding to investigate the mysterious business which had called her here.

She applied to the hackman to whom she intrusted her modest portmanteau, the only baggage with which she had incumbered herself, and he directed her to a private boarding-house kept by a relative of his own. The house was located on a quiet, out-of-the-way street, and was really what it claimed to be, orderly and comfortable.

She was fortunate in securing a back room, the rather remote situation of which proved a drawback to its permanent occupation. The plain, homely aspect of the place, with only so much of convenient adjuncts as was compatible with its character, seemed very inviting to her compared with the bare mode of life she had latterly been compelled to lead.

She ordered a simple supper of rolls and tea, and, despite all sanitary rules, ate of it heartily and forthwith retired. Even this violation of the laws of health had not the power to rob her of the deep repose so much need by her wearied frame. Her sleep was heavy and dreamless, and the morning was well advanced when she awoke.

She felt worn and exhausted still, but conquering her disinclination to move, arose and went down to partake of a substantial and inviting repast. Fortified by steak and omelet, cream-toast and coffee, her languor vanished before thoughts of the exigencies which the day held in store for her.

Returning to her room, she assumed her out-door garments, and then summoned a waiter to make inquiry of the location and best means of reaching No. 17 — street. An hour later she stood within Mr. Chantry's outer office.

A clock upon the wall, whose muffled tick was lost amid the floating sound of city noises, pointed its hands at a quarter to eleven. The clerks at their desks were alternately using ruler and pen with automatical precision. Eve stepped forward, addressing herself to the grave-faced elderly man nearest her.

"Is Mr. Chantry in?"

"Not in, madam," he returned, holding a fresh penful of ink suspended over the blank form before him.

"Will he be here soon, and can I wait for him?"

"Mr. Chantry is out of town for a couple of days, madam. Any business of a general character will be attended to by Mr. Neal."

He inclined his head toward the inner door, which stood ajar. Through the little space Eve could see a rosy-cheeked young fellow thrown carelessly back in one of the office chairs, with slippers feet upon the table, and an unread law tome by his side, evidently taking his ease during the absence of his superior.

"My business is with Mr. Chantry alone."

"Then you will probably find him here at this time day after to-morrow."

Eve turned away, and the clerk resumed his interrupted task without even a glance after her retreating figure.

Two days which she could ill afford to pass there idly lay before her. For the first time since her hurried decision and prompt journey, she questioned the wisdom of the course she had followed. What if, after all, the bubble which had enticed her here should subside into a nonentity? Depressed at the necessity of delay, she took a car and went back to her lodgings.

The boarders there comprised for the most part clerks and shop-girls, varied occasionally by straggling members of the professions who had not yet won either money or fame by their devotion to the chosen branch. These were not yet in to the mid-day meal, and the house lay wrapped in the quietness of the intermediate hours.

Going up the stairway and through the long back corridor, Eve paused and shivered as a succession of anguished moans and mutterings struck upon her ear.

One of the domestics belonging to the house, a girl whose fresh color and unstudied simplicity of manner spoke plainly of rural breeding, came out of a room near by with the tears of a genuine sympathy fresh upon her cheeks.

"What is it?" Eve asked her. "Has there been an accident?"

"Oh, ma'am, it's a sight as would make your heart ache. A bit of a boy that's been took of a sudden with the fever, and him wild as a lunatic a'ready. One minit he's all ago, tossing and screaming, and the next he calms down and begs so piteous like for his mother that's hundreds of miles away."

"Poor fellow," said Eve, pityingly. "Has he no friends in the city?"

"Not one as we know. He's been only a week here. They're taking him to the hospital now."

As she spoke, the door of the room opened for the second time, and two men appeared, bearing the sick boy between them. Eve had a glimpse of his flushed, swollen face, and eyes preternaturally bright, as she passed on to her own apartment. The sight of him, so helpless and with the touch of affliction upon him, came like a reproof for her despondency.

The remainder of that day and the following she passed in strict seclusion, and on the morning of the third returned to Mr. Chantry's office. This time she was ushered at once into the inner room and the lawyer's presence. Mr. Neal was standing by the table explaining some written papers which lay before him, his attentive, submissive manner offering strong contrast to his idle assurance upon the former occasion. At a sign from the elder man he withdrew, and the other turned to Eve inquiringly.

"Mr. Chantry?" she asked, less from doubt of his personality than a desire to gain a moment's reprieve in which to arrange her thoughts to the briefest and clearest manner of presenting her mission.

"Yes, madam!"

"You inserted an advertisement some weeks ago in the New York papers, making inquiry for the

daughter of Edward Collingsbrooke, late of Berkshire, England!"

She produced the paragraph which she had preserved. He glanced at it carelessly and at her with a suspicion of surprise, though his face reflected no shadow of the emotion.

"I did, certainly. May I ask if your visit refers to that?"

"It has brought me a long journey to ascertain its meaning. I am Eve Collingsbrooke."

The lawyer's keen eyes fixed themselves steadily upon her face as he repeated:

"You Miss Collingsbrooke?"

"I am the daughter of Edward Collingsbrooke," she asserted.

Mr. Chantry's impassive countenance underwent no change, but his voice had gained an added tinge of dryness as he said:

"In that case you are of course furnished with credentials. May I trouble you to produce them?"

"Unfortunately, I have none. If it is not trespassing on your time I can give a satisfactory account of their absence."

"Ah, no doubt! but the relation is wholly unnecessary. If this is the extent of your business with me, madam, we will consider the interview closed. Let me warn you for your own welfare to make no more mistakes regarding your identity such as you have been guilty of this morning. Permit me!"

He rose with a stiff bow, making a motion as if to open the door for her exit.

A wave of indignant color surged over Eve's pale face. She also arose, with a gesture that stayed his hand and impelled him to listen to her words.

"At least I have a right to an explanation of your meaning," she said. "I cannot suppose you inserted that advertisement merely for the purpose of subjecting me to insult. There is some mystery here which I do not understand. Will you aid me in its unraveling?"

"If more definite explanation is required, I can readily give it," returned Mr. Chantry. "I have already concluded the business transaction to which this paragraph refers, with the daughter of Captain Collingsbrooke, now the wife of Hugh Frampton, of Frampton."

Eve's gaze reflected her unbounded amazement.

"There has been some unaccountable mistake made," she declared. "I am Eve Collingsbrooke, and I came to the United States in the ship *Phoenix*, accompanied by my father, as the Personal states. I was the betrothed wife of Hugh Frampton. He was to have joined us at the Breton House, but, upon the night of our arrival, the place was consumed by fire. Poor papa perished in the flames!"

Her voice faltered, her lips paled, and her eyes grew humid at memory of his tragic fate. With an effort she regained her composure, and proceeded:

"I escaped with my life, but so severely injured that weeks passed before I realized my irreparable bereavement. I had no friends in this country. My engagement to Mr. Frampton had been the result of an intimacy existing between himself and my father, and I had never met my betrothed husband. When I found myself alone in the world, I preferred struggling on by my own endeavors to applying to Mr. Frampton either for temporary assistance, or the consummation of the existing engagement.

"Less than a week ago I met with this advertisement, and came here, hoping to derive some good from the vague promise contained in it. I have no knowledge of a namesake; certainly no one claiming my name could have fulfilled the conditions here named. Before attempting to decide further, will you tell me for what purpose you inserted the paragraph?"

Mr. Chantry was a cautious man, as it behoves all his class to be, but he foresaw that no ill consequences could ensue from an open explanation regarding the bequest of the diamonds. More than this, Eve's evident sincerity convinced him that at least she had full faith in her own version of the story.

"She is affected with a species of monomania," he decided to himself. "I heard of a case once where a man who was strictly sane on all other points firmly believed himself the great Cæsar, and grew violent when any one attempted to disabuse him of the hallucination. It may prove my quickest way to dispose of her to relate the entire circumstance."

Accordingly he repeated the story he had related to Cecil and her husband, and was surprised at the accurate knowledge which Eve displayed of the Collingsbrooke genealogy.

"Some weeks ago," he concluded, "Mrs. Frampton presented her claim accompanied by conclusive proofs of her identity. Acting upon these the London firm transmitted the jewels, and two days ago I had the pleasure of delivering them to their present owner. I returned last evening from my trip to Frampton Place."

"It is a mystery to me," Eve said. "Can it be that there is such a thing as double existence, as some have claimed?"

The lawyer, watching her attentively, leaned forward as her vail fell out of place, leaving her face unshaded from the full light of the open window.

"You are very like Mrs. Frampton," said he. "You are thinner, paler, but the resemblance is such as might exist between twin sisters. I observed it from the first, but not so clearly as now."

Eve's thoughts flashed back to that night at the Breton House when she and Cecil had been reflected side by side in the mirror, and a glimmering of the truth broke upon her.

"Can she have done so?" she asked herself. "Yet, who except Cecil could successfully enact the role?"

Setting aside the lawyer's suspicions regarding herself, she made minute inquiries about Mrs. Frampton and the proofs which had been produced.

Afterward she ascertained the distance and line of conveyance to Frampton village.

"No doubt you think me either crazed or an impostor," she said, with a faint smile, as she concluded the interview. "I hope to convince you otherwise ere long, much as appearances seem against me now."

The lawyer bowed constrainedly, more embarrassed than he cared to confess, over the complication presented in this second claim, and declined the fee she proffered him, noting at the time the slender little purse from which it was drawn. He drew a breath of relief when she had really departed.

"Poor thing!" he muttered to himself. "It's hard to think of one so young as the victim of a mental aberration. Strange what a power such persons have of influencing others to their belief. I would have felt confident of the truth of her assertions but for my absolute knowledge of other facts. I wonder if she is not a relative of those Collingsbrookes?"

Another client appearing diverted him, and the matter was dismissed from his thoughts.

Eve, dwelling upon the revelation which had been made her, grew more than ever convinced in the opinion she had formed. Some one had usurped her place, and that some one was necessarily Cecil.

She returned to her boarding-house and ordered a frugal repast, for by this time the sum received for her rings was almost exhausted. Afterward she sent for her bill, and settling it, found little over a dollar remaining in her purse.

This she knew was insufficient to pay her fare to Frampton. She removed the change of linen and few traveling conveniences from her portmanteau, doing them up in a close package. She went out upon foot, remembering that at a short distance she had seen the brass balls of a pawn shop.

Here she disposed of the empty portmanteau and afterward proceeded to the railway depot. Procuring a ticket for Frampton, and ascertaining that the first train for that place did not leave for some hours, she sat down in the crowded waiting-room, feeling the full measure of her loneliness with the flow of human life all about her.

A dreary, apathetic feeling was stealing upon her. There was a dull ache in her brain, and a dry harshness upon her lips. She told herself that this was reaction from the excitement she had experienced; and at last, after a seemingly interminable delay, she found herself aboard the train on her way to Frampton.

CHAPTER X.

THE PIC-NIC.

THIS summer seemed rife with adventurous incident for Olive. To arrive at the climax of affairs reached at Frampton Place when Eve Collingsbrooke prosecuted her journey thither, it will be necessary to go back a week or more and take up some of the strands which made up the woof of the passing events.

Frampton village and vicinity contained a number of substantial residents, solid old families that constituted the elite of the neighborhood. Thus there was no dearth of good society or amusement, for these all mingled with the informal intercourse which characterizes hospitable, well-to-do country dwellers; people with plenty of time for recreation, and plenty of zest for the same.

A picnic party was made up one afternoon, when the glare of the sunshine on the ripened harvest-fields and the dusty stretch of white roadway, brought the forest shadows and depths of greenery into more tempting relief.

The belt of woodland intersecting Frampton Place stretched back in a straggling line for a couple of miles, where it culminated in a dense growth of forest, much of which was yet impeded by intricacies of underbrush. The skirts of the woods were well cleared, and it was in one of the pleasantest spots that our pleasure-seekers of the day intrenched themselves.

It was a miscellaneous company, comprising a dozen different families, old and young, mingling together with mutual enjoyment. Mr. Frampton had driven over in his light open carriage, crammed with provisions, and afterward gone in search of and taken bodily possession of one or two jolly old persons whose near approach to octogenarianism and encroaching infirmities had not diminished their delight in such pastime.

Cecil and Olive, accompanied by the two gentlemen, Victor D'Arno and Richard Holstead, had preferred to walk. The shaded woodpath, overarched by meeting boughs and festoons of drooping vines held so many delights that they loitered long on the way, and it was near mid-afternoon when they came upon the assembled party.

After exchanging greetings and mingling for a time with the strolling company, Olive seated herself upon an improvised chair formed by the intertwining of tough, pliant twigs, and braced by a couple of saplings. Richard Holstead saw her there and left his place by Cecil to approach her side.

"A reward for your thoughts," he challenged her. "Are you revolving some weighty measure which has provoked such a contemplative expression?"

"I did not know that my countenance so clearly reflected my idealistic bent," she returned, "but I'm in a moralizing mood. I was wondering how much of the enjoyment about us is purely real, and how much attributable to the masks people always wear."

"For instance?" he questioned.

"There is uncle Hugh, who has been buttonholed by Mr. Darnley, whose hobby is agriculture. Now, uncle has no appreciation of the beauties developed in a head of cabbage or made manifest in a field

of parsnips. He is being intolerably bored yet submits with the grace of a martyr."

"Your penetration is acute, but in this instance you have failed to utilize one point in the case. Mrs. Frampton stands less than a dozen paces from the two, and while her husband appears to be bending an attentive ear to his companion's homily, his eyes are constantly wandering toward her. His civil responses, lip deep, are not interfering with the gratification he derives in seeing the influence she wields over the circle gathered around her. She is deservedly a general favorite."

Olive smiled.

"You have satisfactorily explained my uncle's complacent demeanor, but how shall you account for Mrs. Frampton's exuberant spirits? There is Percy Gray at her side, dividing his attention between his mustache and his lip; and Walter Caldwell filling up the intervals with quotation from his own poems. The remainder of the circle possess all the vanity of the one without his excessive good nature, and the self-esteem and arrogance of the other without his modicum of brain to make them endurable. Mrs. Frampton's keen appreciation of the ludicrous seems lost in her thorough enjoyment of her present society."

"She is too kind at heart to wound any of the silly lads by betraying the amusement their separate foibles may afford her. She is no doubt resolved to take all the sweets that are so abundantly offered her, and too generous to fling back the bitter drops after the honey is all extracted. Now give me your ideas regarding Mr. D'Arno and the volatile little lady who is engaging his attention."

Olive glanced toward the couple indicated. Her eyes had wandered that way before, but now she studied his attitudes and expressions with renewed interest.

"You have given me a problem to solve," she said. "Sophie Darnley can be read through at a glance; a whole-souled girl, whose mischievous inclination and versatile manner often subject her to censure which her truly generous nature does not merit. See! from her pantomime I imagine that she is mimicking some one present, for the edification of herself and companion. That he is amused by her effort is evident, yet he does not appear to be giving her his undivided attention. Even when he laughs most heartily, the merriment in his face will give way unconsciously to an expression of unreadable self-absorption. He seems to be following an undercurrent of thought which is wholly distinct from the surface of word and act betrayed. Can you catch my idea? I fear I have expressed it very imperfectly."

"It is the case with any thing we do not fully understand. Some one has said, that which we cannot express in words is never a perfect idea. Our tongues will not halt except over an impotent fancy—a fact not comprehensively realized. If true, it brings home a conviction which is not calculated to feed jealous vanity; namely, how very little of even the simplest subjects our minds thoroughly master."

"And human nature is like a scroll lying open before us, the complications of which baffle our utmost efforts to follow through their windings."

"Incomprehensible to us because we are only human. Have you never been surprised at discovering some new, unsuspected phase of your own nature? Are you not often impressed by likes and dislikes for which you can give no well-based reasons? How then can we pretend to judge the world when we are enigmas to ourselves?"

"The thought may appear presumptuous, but may not outside sight prove clearest? We judge from demonstrations that we see; may not these prove more patent to us than to those from whom they originate? A mirror will reproduce nothing except actual objects placed within its angle of reflection. Are not our minds mirrors, thoughts the intangible objects pictured there, words and acts their reflection?"

"We are falling into the regular Yankee mode of argument, answering question by question. To continue it—does not that refute our theory of masks first advanced?"

"I have proved myself illogical, no doubt. To use an old simile, 'The further we go in the bog, the deeper we plunge in the mire.' I am quite willing to take the world as it appears without searching into its possibilities."

"Yet these possibilities often prove levers which fate uses in turning our lives. I am almost tempted to decide a point in mine by a revelation which may prove premature."

A magnetic influence drew Olive's gaze to his. Her rapid glance took in every detail of his stalwart, muscular frame, his fair face stamped with the power of conscious strength, very different from the effeminacy of feature which so often marks blonde men, his bright, sweeping beard, and clear eyes looking down into hers with a searching earnestness that sent the blood in hot flushes to her cheeks, and tingling to her taper finger-ends.

What might be the possibility which fate held in store for him, Richard Holstead was not destined then to learn. A merry voice broke their *tete-á-tete*.

"Oh, for the gift of intuitive wisdom to discover whether your wits have gone wool-gathering!"

"It might not be *lapropos* for wisdom to tread in the footsteps of folly, Miss Darnley," smiled Dick.

"Then you acknowledge of having said foolish things? Olive, how could you suffer it? If she was your inspiration, Mr. Holstead, I come armed with relief. I bring a summons for you. Mrs. Frampton requires your assistance in decorating the tables. Do use your influence to persuade her that the sand-

wishes of life are at the present moment far more essential than its roses. I am most unpoetically hungry."

Banding some light reply, Richard left them, and Olive made a place for the merry girl by her side.

"True confession easeth the soul!" Make me your father-confessor, Olive, and receive absolution for having monopolized the handsomest man upon the grounds. The girls are half-wild with envy."

"Not you, certainly, Sophie? I did not witness the effect of your blandishments upon Mr. D'Arno without awarding you the palm for successful coquetry. Poor Walter has been dependent entirely upon the divided mercies of Mrs. Frampton."

"Poor Walter received evident consolation," retorted Sophie, pouting. "But I cannot give you credit for your penetration. Mr. D'Arno has been successively devoted to every one in feminine shape—yourself excepted—since he made his appearance; and you owe emancipation from his attentions to your complete monopoly. Mr. Holstead has a fair base for encouragement."

"Oh, there's nothing half so sweet in life. As love's young dream!"

"Nonsense!" cried Olive, half annoyed at this light raillery. "I should be sorry to believe that my conduct should be construed into a mark of preference, even if so strongly defined as you hint. But, I hope you have been drawing upon your fund for exaggeration as coloring for the circumstance."

"Shades of offended dignity! what have I done?" cried Sophie, in ludicrous mock distress.

"Pierced that tender heart
With a conscious dart
Of its own infirmity!"

"Nothing was further from my intention, 'pon honor, Olive."

"I accept the *amende honorable*, but disclaim the application of your poetry. By the way, Sophie, have you caught the spirit of versification from Walter? His muse is prolific of such tender outbreaks as you have just expressed, is it not?"

"Well, if so, he means it honestly enough, and that is better than being quizzed by such a statue of immobility as Mr. D'Arno. I didn't half the time know if he was complimenting or making sport of me."

"Ah, I thought I would induce you to take up the gauntlet in defense of your old favorite," laughed Olive. "And here he comes, beaming with delight at the prospect of finding you unattended. Let me advise you to be gracious, Sophie!"

"Advice is like medicinal drugs, best taken in small doses," Sophie declared, and, with her usual perversity, turned to beckon Percy Gray to her side. But Walter, detecting her purpose, quickly foisted it by usurping the reserved place; and in five minutes more had so won upon her favor that no shadow of restraint or ill-will marred their intercourse.

The afternoon wore on, and the sultry calm of the atmosphere changed to a fitful breeze. Gusts of air swayed the boughs, and carried messages from whispering leaves. Some floating clouds that had laid low against the horizon, gathered shape and density as they crept like darkening shadows across the sky.

A storm was brooding, and the more experienced ones among our picnic party were quick to take alarm.

"It will be a tempest," said Mrs. Darnley, after a careful survey of the heavens. Those sharp-edged clouds that are wheeling up so rapidly, carry mischief in them. We must make haste if we wish to avoid a taste of their contents."

Thus admonished, the younger people gathered together their appurtenances, and set off on their return. The vehicle were brought round for the elders, and the grove was speedily deserted by the crowd who had lately made it resound with their lightsome gayety.

Among the last to take their departure were those from Frampton Place. Dick having taken active part in aiding the retreat, looked around him apprehensively.

"Where is Miss Tremaine?" he asked.

"Olive?" queried Mr. Frampton, "I had forgotten the child. Eve," addressing his wife with evident anxiety, "have you seen anything of her?"

Cecil, glancing around, caught Victor D'Arno's eye, and read the mute message it conveyed.

"She has probably gone ahead," she returned, cardably. "She was with the Darnleys, a short time before the alarm was given."

A moment later Victor gained speech with her, unperceived.

"She did not go with the Darnleys," he asserted, half questioning.

"No; I saw them as they left. Did I misinterpret your meaning?"

"Quite the contrary. I saw her wandering away into the woods alone, an hour ago, and am confident she did not return. Don't let them take alarm for a time, I want some such hold upon her as this opportunity may afford me—a claim to her gratitude by showing myself the only one to remember her at this crisis. You understand?"

"Yes; but will there not be danger if the storm is violent?"

"Not of consequence. You must go, now, they are waiting for you."

"Come, Eve," called her husband. "There is room for all in the carriage."

Soon they were bowling away over the smooth road, all but Cecil unconscious that Victor had purposely remained behind and that Olive was not already on her way homeward.

When Frampton Place was reached, and it was discovered that the latter had not returned, Mr. Frampton betrayed some annoyance, but no actual apprehension.

"I suppose she has gone home with the Darnleys," said he. "It was very thoughtless of her to do so without informing us of her intention. I fear the storm will break before they reach the farm!"

Hoarse mutterings of thunder had been filling the air with their vibrations. The wind swept down in fierce gusts, sweeping loose *œ*ris before it, doubling the tree-tops, and lashing them with scouring branches.

Then a calm fell—a monotonous lull which was broken by the outburst of the tempest in all its gathered fury.

The rain came down in driving sheets; lightning flashed luridly; thunder reverberated in peals like artillery volleys, and the dusk of early evening changed almost instantaneously into thick darkness.

Above the uproar of the storm came an imperative summons at the closed portal. The door was opened to admit the Darnleys, who were accompanied by Walter Caldwell, all breathless and excited from their race in a vain attempt to distance the violence of the storm.

CHAPTER XI.

A STRANGE BETROTHAL.

SOPHIE DARNLEY's merry voice made itself heard above the surprised exclamations which greeted their appearance.

"Mr. Frampton, do give us credit for taking you literally by storm. We come in a sorry plight, for I must confess that the elements got the better of us, but I have too much confidence in the hospitality of your nature to imagine you will be sorry for this invasion. After all, it is far jollier than having reached the farm to be left in dull solitude for three days to come, as a result of this rain. Ugh! how it does come down."

"Welcome, Miss Sophie, whenever and however you may chance to come. But how is it that the pleasure of your presence has been so unexpectedly given us? I feared that you might not reach the farm, but thought you would certainly gain the village before the storm would break."

"You see," explained Sophie, "Walter and I were walking, and papa had taken into his conveyance all those whom he could set down on his direct way. He overtook us after having disposed of one or two passengers, and insisted upon our taking the vacant places. By the time he had stopped here and there to put down the remainder, the storm was close upon us."

"We were alone when we passed Frampton Place, and pa thought that by swift driving we might yet reach home. You would have thought him a firm devotee of the turf, could you have seen the manner in which he put old Dobbin to his best speed."

"All went well for the first quarter mile until we reached Mr. Gray's oat field, when he became so absorbed in calculating the probable yield of that particular variety of grain per acre, that he turned us comfortably over into the gutter, and smashed a wheel during the progress."

"We took counsel together, and the result was we made all haste back to beg shelter of you, but were overtaken by the storm on the way. That, in a nutshell, is our situation."

"Since your calamity is of no more serious nature, I can rejoice over the temporary inconvenience which resulted in sending you here. But where is Olive—was she not with you?"

"Olive? Is she not here? I have not seen her since we were together in the woods."

"Where can she have gone?" queried Cecil, with an assumption of extreme anxiety. "We felt sure that she had returned with you, and experienced no alarm regarding her absence."

"She may have gone with the Grays or Boswicks?" suggested Mr. Frampton.

"No; I am positive that she was not with them," Sophie declared. "She would scarcely pass Frampton Place to accompany any one to the village. Oh, Mr. Frampton."

She broke off her words with a shudder as the alternative to which Olive might be subjected, flashed across her mind. Richard Holstead divined her unexpressed fear, and cried out, sharply:

"Good Heavens! Can she have been left in the forest?"

"Oh, I hope not. I sincerely hope not," said Mr. Frampton. "It would be a fearful thing for her to be cut alone in the night and the storm."

"I will go to the village and ascertain if she is there," Richard declared.

As he spoke there came a burst of thunder which shook the solid old house to its foundation. The rain was driven against the closed oaken shutters in volumes that would have beaten in less substantial protectors. Involuntarily they drew closer together, appalled by the war the elements were waging without.

"No, no, my boy!" Mr. Frampton interposed, as Richard made a movement to put his resolve into instant execution. "You must not venture out now; it would be madness to do so. You would only jeopardize your own safety without benefiting her. We can do nothing until the storm abates."

"And, meantime, she may be exposed to it all! No. Mr. Frampton, I cannot remain idle while that consideration weighs upon me. Think of the perils surrounding her if our worst fears be true!"

Mr. Frampton groaned aloud. He knew that the tempest must be crushing down whole trees in that long stretch of forest. He could no longer attempt to dissuade Richard from his purpose.

"Then I shall accompany you," he said. "Olive is my sister's child, and dear to me as though she

were my own. While such danger threatens her I shall not remain selfishly inactive. I could never forgive myself should any harm befall her."

"I am young and hardy," Richard replied, "but you must not unnecessarily wear out your strength when it may be needed later. Alone, I can accomplish as much as if you should accompany me. If Miss Tremaine is not at the village, I will muster a company to search the wood soon as it shall be expedient to venture thither. It will be impossible to do so until the fury of the storm has passed. You will give greater aid by preparing for that emergency should it come, which I pray Heaven it may not!"

"And I," said Walter Caldwell, "am ready to go in your stead and shall insist upon doing so. Surely, Holstead, you will not refuse my services."

"Thanks," responded Dick, warmly. "But it is quite unnecessary. You will accord greater aid by bearing torches and such accessories as will be needed in searching the forest. Your own good sense will suggest what is best to be done, while I hasten to prove or disprove our fears."

He had been enveloping himself in waterproof wrappings while he spoke, and now went out into the night, dead-black, except when illuminated by the lightning flashes.

Going to the stables he equipped and led out one of the sturdy farm-horses, one all sinew and strength, slow, but endued with the dogged persistency which will plod patiently against all odds. He mounted, and with cap drawn low upon his brow to shield his eyes from the driving rain, turned his horse's head in the direction of the village, letting the rein drop loosely upon the neck. He could trust better to the animal's sure footing and acute instinct in the darkness than to his own judgment.

Olive was nowhere in the village. No one had seen her after the word had been given to leave the woods. Dick set his teeth and breathed hard in his keen realization of the agony she must have endured.

Two hours later the wind sunk and the fierce thunderbursts dwindled into monotonous mutterings. It was raining still, but the fury of the tempest was spent. A party of a score of men, led by Holstead, carrying torches and axes for clearing away fallen debris, started for the scene of their afternoon's pleasure. Mr. Frampton and Walter Caldwell were among the foremost, pushing on with an indefatigable zeal that would not be diminished by the obstacles they encountered.

In the midst of the excitement caused by Olive's absence, Victor had not been missed. Only Cecil sat with hands clasped in a tense strain, with a scared, drawn look on her white face that the girl's danger had not brought there.

She had been compelled by him to lend her assistance to Victor's schemes; she had tried to make herself believe that she had buried her past life beyond power of resurrection; but now, when those two were in equal peril, the girl who was destined to some time listen to the fond words—receive the endearments which had one time been the joy of her life, and the man she loved still despite her sworn allegiance to another, Cecil thrilled with a kind of fierce exultation as she told herself that she could better endure to have them both die upon that night than to see them live and mutually love.

Sophie Darnley, pacing up and down the long corridors, wringing her hands and giving hysterical vent to her expressions of grief, came to her once with her loud lamentations. But Cecil cut her short and sent her away with some sharp, reproving words. She could not endure any presence while that struggle raged in her own breast.

And meantime, how fared Olive and the would-be claimant of her gratitude?

She had wandered away, as Victor had said, into the more intricate depths of the wood. She was neither thinking deeply upon any subject, nor yet impelled by a love of solitude. Some dreamy, half-formed fancies were floating through her brain; she was rearing castles in Spain and peopling them with the embodiments of pleasant possibilities. Perhaps Richard Holstead's fair face and clear eyes formed a counterpart amid these; perhaps that revelation of his just hinted at formed a base for the up-building of a fabric light as air, and perishable as gossamer.

We all know how such sweet, idle moments will fly away with solid time. Olive was waked suddenly from her reverie by the mutterings of thunder, to find the wood enveloped in semi-obscenity caused by the gathering clouds.

She turned to retrace her steps, but after walking rapidly for a considerable distance, found, by the thickening forest growth and the broken character of the ground, that she was penetrating deeper into the wood instead of escaping from it.

She changed her direction and pressed hurriedly on, calling aloud now and then the names of her friends, and pausing to listen intently for a response. None came. The darkness settled down upon the wood like a dense pall enshrouding it.

The wind raised, and the trees above her creaked dismally as they doubled beneath it. Her vivid imagination seemed to people them with living spirits groaning aloud in torment.

Bewildered and despairing, unable longer to distinguish objects in the gloom, she sank down upon the earth and drearily waited for the succor which, hoping against hope, she thought might reach her.

The boughs above her quivered and grew still in the sudden calm which fell upon them. No breath of air stirred them, until, with a hoarse murmur, growing shriller as it came, a quick gust swept over all. The forest heaved and surged like the billows of a rolling sea. Branches were torn off and hurl downward; trees were twisted through the tena-

cious fibers of their living trunks and fell crashing to the ground. The clouds let loose the burden they bore, and Olive shudderingly crouched lower as the floods of heaven poured down upon her.

She had always been painfully affected by thunderstorms. Only those who have known similar nervous timidity can adequately conjecture the depth of terror she experienced in her forlorn situation. She clasped her hands tightly over her eyes to shut out the flashes of blinding light, and lay almost devoid of sense, yet conscious of keener suffering than resulted merely from her chilled, drenched frame.

The minutes dragged like hours. She had no idea of the time that had elapsed, when a sound was borne to her which was distinct from the confusion of the noisy elements.

A voice which at first seemed a delusion of her own fancy, calling her name.

"Olive, Olive, Olive!"

She struggled to her feet and tried to cry out in reply, but her voice came in hoarse murmurs, and she grew strangely faint and powerless.

Nearer and nearer came the cry:

"Olive, Olive!"

She staggered forward and gaining strength as she realized that it was really aid, found voice to answer.

Her faint cry was met by a triumphant shout; and Victor, trampling down the growth of scrubby brushwood, and clambering over fallen trees and branches reached her side.

"Oh, Olive, thank God that I have found you! My darling, my love! I have found you at last!"

His arm was about her, and she nestled close to him with a feeling of relief and security that followed her late agony like the peace of heaven falling upon the purified soul released from purgatory.

"Olive, speak! You are not injured? You have escaped without harm?"

"I have not been harmed, but oh, so frightened and lonely!"

"And you are neither frightened nor lonely now, my love? Tell me, darling, that I have brought you peace and rest."

"You have brought me peace and rest," she repeated. "All my fear is gone, Victor!"

No remembrance of the afternoon and the thrill that Richard Holstead's words and looks had sent through her being came to warn her that her sense of utter peace might be no more than the natural reaction of her late overwrought faculties. And Victor, quick to embrace the advantage he had gained, drew from her the sweetest assurance which a woman can accord to the man who loves her.

Do not think her wavering or fickle! The ordeal through which she had passed was a terrible one to her; his opportune appearance had brought her a relief which swallowed every other consideration. Moreover, this man possessed a power which he had been wont to exert unmercifully when the chance at stake was less great than at present.

He could throw a world of pathetic tenderness into his voice, a depth of earnestness into his protestations, which would carry a conviction worthy of perfect truth.

So Olive, never realizing how utterly she mistook the dictates of her heart and nature, exchanged betrothal vows with the man who shared with her uncle's wife the recollection of a past which stamped him unworthy of the trust and love of a guileless soul like hers.

Through the tedious hours of the night the searching-party prosecuted their task. Torches flashed through the intricacies of the wood; shouts resounded from point to point; but it was near dawn when the signal, caught up and echoed from side to side, told that the lost was found.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WELCOME HOME.

The spot where Olive took refuge and where Victor found her, had escaped the worst ravages of the tempest. It was in a portion of the wood made up of scrubby tangled growth, but even here some of the larger trees had been torn up by the wind.

It seemed almost miraculous that they should have escaped injury, when the devastation which the surrounding sections had sustained, was taken into consideration.

Victor, indeed, had received some slight bruises from a falling trunk which barely escaped him, during his search for the lost girl. Olive shuddered as she comprehended how imminent had been their danger.

They had walked back and forth beneath the dripping branches during the latter portion of the night. Olive was numbed and chilled, ready to succumb to the torpor brought on by her exposure and fatigue, but her companion's watchfulness preserved her from the evil effects which such submissiveness must have entailed.

Cecil stood by the window of her own apartment while the gray dawn changed rosily before the rising sun. She had slept none during the night. The long hours dragged away while she watched, in a state which strangely intermingled mute anguish and fierce, despairing hope. Anguish over the contemplation of her own unacknowledged loss should aught befall Victor; hope, that this night's events might spare her the agony of seeing Olive his.

She could command a view of the avenue from where she stood, through the intricacies of the foliage. She had endured the miseries of suspense through all the night, but now when the light of day seemed to promise speedy news, she shrank

from learning the fate of those two who were so differently allied to her.

A moving object dotted a distant point of view. She knew instinctively that it was a messenger from the searching-party. She turned away from the window with a fierce pang tugging at her heart. What news could he bring her that would cause other than pain?

Conquering herself, she resumed her position after a moment. Soon other straggling forms came in sight, but before she could distinguish these individually, a confusion of voices and glad shouts from below assured her of what nature were the tidings brought.

She clenched her hands together in a tight grip, which left the imprint of her nails upon the palms. There had been a feeling akin to murder in her heart during the hours past, and the revolution she experienced now, was a sense of dead disappointment in knowing their safety.

She went down the stairs slowly, her face haggard in the early light, her eyes heavy-lidded, and mouth quivering with hysterical emotion. She had usually a strong control over her feelings, but she was unnerved now, more by the mental struggle she had sustained than the night's vigil.

She gave a hurried order or two to the servants for the accommodation of the men who had aided in the search. An immense fire had been kept blazing in the large kitchen all the night and now, as the villagers, drenched and weary, yet forgetting their discomfort and fatigue in joy over the happy termination of their work, came up in straggling groups of twos and threes, they were ushered into the warmth and cheerfulness of that apartment. Hot coffee, with a substantial collation such as could be served on short notice, were already under preparation.

Cecil saw that the housekeeper, Mrs. Blodgett, had anticipated her own more tardy movement; and glad to be relieved from the cumbrous duties the occasion called up, she went out upon the veranda as her husband, supporting Olive, reached the steps. Richard Holstead, silent, but attentive, walked by their side; while Victor and Walter Caldwell more slowly brought up the rear.

"Ah, Eve, we have our castaways safe enough," called out Mr. Frampton, cheerfully. "My poor girl! you look as if worried fairly ill."

"Don't mind me," replied Cecil. "I am quite well now that I know you are all safe."

She clasped Olive's hands in her own, outstretched; and kissed her warmly, while tears welled up into her eyes and quivered upon her lashes in glittering drops.

"My dear, dear Olive! I have been so frightened for you."

Olive returned the caress gratefully, but her uncle hurried her within, saying, as he did so:

"You have plenty of opportunity for playing the Good Samaritan, Eve. Put this willful child to bed and dose her with chamomile and tansy, or toast and coffee if she prefers. A hot bath and twenty-four hours between the blankets—do you hear the prescription, my dear?"

"I shall certainly raise no demur," Olive returned, smilingly, but with evident weariness. "It is almost an effort for me to stand."

"Which you mustn't do a second longer than is necessary," declared her uncle, peremptorily. "Sophie, my good girl, reserve that hysterical effusion for another time!"

But Sophie Darnley, flying down the stairway in the dishabille she had assumed for the night, had her arms about Olive and was laughing and crying over her in truly feminine fashion.

"Oh, you dear, poor child! Were you out in all that dreadful storm? Oh, how you must have suffered! We've been wild with apprehension, and I've imagined such horrid things. Oh! oh! oh!!!"

"But you see I am quite safe," Olive said, gently unclasping the other's clinging embrace.

"Yes; but I've been so terrified thinking what might be."

"There, there!" interposed Mr. Frampton, with some impatience. "Don't you suppose she realized the horrors of her situation without having them rehearsed now? Take Olive to her room, Eve; and you, Sophie, keep away till you've regained enough of common sense to be useful."

Sophie, half indignant at the reproof, subdued her hysterical inclinations and insisted upon accompanying her friend. Cecil, who had scarcely ventured a glance toward Victor, passing him, now, raised her eyes, questioningly, to his face.

He answered her mute inquiry with a quiet smile of triumph. She knew then that he had gained a supremacy over the unsuspecting girl at her side, just as, years before, he had drawn from her a different and idolatrous worship. But no one saw the white shade which flashed across her face, or the rigid tension of the lines about her mouth.

Afterward, as she went softly about the room, administering to Olive's comfort, the latter followed her with grateful glance, and, with the frankness of impulse which characterized her, spoke the thought in her mind.

"I didn't know you cared so much for me, Eve!" She had learned to address her uncle's wife thus familiarly by her assumed name when alone with her. "I'm afraid I've credited you with some of that latent antagonism which is said to exist between all individual members of our sex."

"Then you have misjudged me, my dear," Cecil replied, softly. "I want you to love me and trust me as one who is most anxious for your happiness."

And Olive, sinking into slumber with a feeling of quiet contentment pervading her wearied senses, little dreamed of the bitter envy against herself which rankled in the other's breast.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE POWER OF GUILTY LOVE.

A WEEK, marked only by commonplace events, went by at Frampton Place. Olive had quite recovered from the effects of her night's exposure, and Sophie Darnley, who remained a few days, had taken her departure.

The repairs upon the main body of the house were quite completed; upholsterers from the city had arrived and were engaged in fitting the rooms with elegant modern furnishings.

There was still much to be done, a whole wing untouched, but a number of the workmen had been dismissed and a short reprieve granted to the rest.

Dick Holstead—good son that he was—took advantage of the time to pay a welcome visit to his mother. Before he went, he had been made acquainted with the fact, not yet announced without the immediate family, of Olive's engagement to Victor D'Arno.

Whatever he may have felt of litter disappointment at this consummation, whatever of regret over the sudden blasting of a bright hope he had cherished, or satisfaction that his secret had not been exposed and subjected to her refusal, he gave no outward evidence. He was a strong, honest man, and suffered with the intensity of his whole nature. The short absence from Frampton Place, and consequently from Olive, together with the certainty of his mother's sympathy, were doubly welcome, coming coincidental as they did.

It was at this time that Mr. Chantry made his appearance, and delivered into Cecil's hands the famed Collingsbrooke diamonds. They were large, lustrous stones, of great value, uniquely set in old-fashioned mountings.

"They must be reset," said Mr. Frampton; "and you shall wear them at Olive's birthnight *fête*, Eve. My wife must represent the blue blood she inherits with due honor!"

Cecil smiled inscrutably, but agreeing with him, it was decided that the gems should be sent to the city at an early day.

Olive's birthday, regularly celebrated, was on this occasion to be fraught with an additional interest—the announcement of her own and Victor's betrothal.

The latter had urged his suit to Mr. Frampton with all of a lover's impetuosity with this gratifying result. Whatever Mr. Frampton's own scruples might have been in thus giving up the child who occupied a place in his affections truly as if she had been his own, his faith in his wife was sufficient to overrule his objections to resigning her to a comparative stranger.

The references D'Arno produced seemed amply satisfactory, and it was understood, though not yet definitely agreed upon, that there should be no long delay to try the patience of the young people.

Cecil remained apparently quiescent while the man who had been so much to her, for whom her whole soul yearned even now, pursued his intent. But the quietest surface sometimes conceals a restless underflow; and the stream is glassily smooth, though resistlessly strong, above the cataract.

These weeks of constant intercourse in the country home where all were thrown together unrestrainedly, had served to show her how futile was the strength of will she had prided herself upon; how slender was the bond connecting her with the new life she had falsely entered upon.

Victor came upon her suddenly, one morning, as she walked alone in the grounds. She had seemed to avoid him of late, and his own self-pride tempted him—beyond his better judgment, perhaps—to meet her in the old tender way.

"Cecil," he said, drawing her hand within his arm and timing his pace to suit hers, "you certainly cannot blame me for the course I have taken. And while it is so, you must not deny me the happiness which you of all women only can give me. Try as you will, you cannot banish me from your heart; if I did not know that, I might not be willing to wait."

She caught at his implied meaning breathlessly.

"To wait, Victor! For what?"

"Do you suppose that I could see you, Cecil, more radiant than when our changing fortunes wore upon your freshness, yet left you ever beautiful in my sight, be thrown with you day after day, and not remember your old true devotion—our happiness? I seem to have buried all the bitterness of our past in remembrances of its sweets. Do you think I can look back then, and while there is a chance of regaining the Paradise I once lost, put the hope of it out of my thoughts?"

"Whas do you mean, Victor? You speak in riddles!"

"I mean that our separation *shall not* be for all time, Cecil—that the obstacles existing now shall be swept away sooner or later, and until that time comes we will not deprive ourselves of the joy the knowledge may bring us."

"It can be," she half questioned, half asserted. "Have you guessed my thoughts?"

"What are they?"

"You asked me once if I would give up my present position to take up our wandering life again. I thought I had trampled down woman's dearest weakness, that of loving; and I told you that nothing could influence me to go back to it and you. But now, Victor, one word from you is enough to make me willingly your slave, if you will have it so."

"No, not that, Cecil! Mine with the equality which unselfish love demands, as I am yours. It will not be so hard to be patient, now that we have this understanding, will it?"

"Why do you counsel patience? Why not create the sunshine of the present from what you picture so glowingly for our future?"

"Your husband is scarcely an old man yet, and he may live for years; but, in the common course of

nature we will both survive him long enough. And I—"

"If it is your proposition to wait the decease of my husband, you have changed greatly since you wooed me of old. Why do you mock me with bright visions, if only to obscure them by such a paltry suggestion?"

"You did not hear me out. I shall never ask you to share such a life as we once led. Let me follow my plans, gain possession of Olive's fortune, and then, Cecil, there will be no question of our future together."

"Olive! Do you mean that you will not give her up for me?"

"That would be folly. Remember, she is only my stepping-stone to ease and happiness, as Hugh Frampton must be yours."

"Oh, Victor, if there is to be anything of the old ties between us, let us put away selfish considerations from the first."

"Ah, but then we could not avoid the old miseries."

"I have the Collingsbrooke diamonds, in themselves a fortune. We need never come to want."

"No, Cecil; I may revoke my word and claim some of that submission you tendered a moment ago. You must be guided by me in this, and be content, knowing the revival stronger than ever of my devotion to you."

"But to think of her as your wife! To know that she will receive the caresses which should be mine only! I frighten myself with the thoughts which the depths of my hatred for her suggest when that possibility thrusts itself before me."

"Though my wife she will not have my love, Cecil. If you were free now it might be otherwise, but while you are willing to break your bonds for my sake, you must endure as much as I have borne in the weeks past. Do you think I have had no pangs when I witnessed your tenderness to your fond old husband? But I knew you truly as you know yourself, and had no fear of the issue."

"We must have wealth enough to insure our future from the chances of evil befalling, and for this end I will pursue my settled plans. With Olive's fortune and your marriage portion converted into ready money, you can afford to keep the diamonds as a *souvenir* of this time. Let me hear you say that you are satisfied, Cecil!"

"You are giving me the sorest test of woman's love, Victor; but for your sake and my own I will bear it through. I can do so now!"

A little more was said and then they parted. Cecil lingered still in the grounds, too full of the conscious unrest of guilty happiness to venture yet to face those she was planning with him to wrong.

So occupied was she in her own thoughts that she did not observe the approach of another until the shadow fell athwart her path. She looked up then and started back in superstitious terror. For a second she thought that the ghost of Eve Collingsbrooke stood before her, so pitiful was the resemblance between that wasted, somber-ciad figure and the gentle mistress she had served.

Then, before a word had been spoken she grappled with and conquered her momentary fear, losing it in another no less, knowing this to be Eve Collingsbrooke, alive.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE UNWELCOME GUEST.

Eve was the first to break the silence between them.

"It is really you, Cecil," said she. "I knew it must be so, but almost hoped for disappointment, because I did not wish to believe it of you. Yet I am glad that you too escaped! You thought me dead, did you not?"

"Yes; you must know that I did," Cecil replied. "Otherwise, I would have sought you out at once."

Eve looked at her doubtfully.

"Would you? Would you have relinquished the advantage which my supposed death afforded you? You see, I know how you have wronged me!"

"I never meant to wrong you," Cecil declared, earnestly, wondering inwardly how much of her deception the other really knew. "Times have greatly changed for me since we were together last."

"Yes, I know. You are Mrs. Frampton now, the wife of the man who was to have been my husband. I know how you have deceived him, and of the other benefit you have derived from the usurpation of my name."

Cecil's doubt settled into certainty now. There was no use trying to blind Eve by a fresh deceit, as it had been in her mind to do. After all, it would have been difficult to have done so, and yet avert the exposure she feared. Her object now was to keep the presence of the other from being known by the household.

"Come this way where we can speak unmolested," she said, leading the way down an obscure path at the further end of which was a neglected arbor, overrun with matted vines. She entered this, and Eve, following with painful, dragging steps, sunk wearily upon the rude bench within.

"I never meant to wrong you," Cecil repeated. "I thought you were dead, and I was alone, friendless, unprovided for. It seemed so easy to secure loving care and a home; maybe you have known what it is to be without them since. If you have you cannot blame me much, when I thought I was harming no one. I never would have done it had I known you were alive."

"You should not have deceived Mr. Frampton. What do you suppose I have come here for?"

"Not to betray me, don't say that! He loves me, and you would give him bitter grief without bringing good to yourself."

She knew the truth of what she said—and more—

and shuddered at thought of the remorseless, unforgiving spirit such an exposure would be sure to arouse in Hugh Frampton.

"Perhaps so!" Eve spoke slowly and with effort. "I meant to have told him the truth; but I believe you, and am tempted to leave such retribution as your act deserves find you in its own good time. Give me only what is mine, and you shall be free from fear or molestation from me."

"And that is?" questioned Cecil.

"The Collingsbrooke diamonds, which have descended rightfully to me. I ask no restitution for what would have been mine had not fate interposed to thwart those plans of which you have reaped the benefit. My legacy of diamonds will secure me comfortable independence, and that is all I ask or wish."

Cecil passed her hands slowly one above the other as she thought. Left to herself she would gladly have complied with Eve's demand, and thus have gained security to herself. But how could she account for the disappearance of the gems to her husband, at this time, too, of all others, when she knew they would be almost immediately missed? She formed one quick resolve, to gain time, and for this purpose prevaricated to Eve.

"The diamonds are not here," she said. "I have sent them to the city to be reset. My husband expects me to wear them at a party to be given more than a week from this, and I dare not be without them then. You shall have them after that."

Eve scarcely seemed to be heeding. She roused herself to catch at the last words.

"After a week; ah, yes! the diamonds. I must have them, you know, for they are mine. It is very hard to be poor and in want, and those little glittering stones are all I shall have to keep me from poverty. How hot and heavy the air has grown!"

She was speaking in a rambling, half-incoherent manner. Cecil, looking at her with startled fixedness, saw that her wan cheeks were stained now by a hectic flush, and her weary eyes had grown strangely bright.

"You are ill, I fear," she said, touching her finger upon the other's rapid pulse. "Here is money—not much, but enough! Go back to the village and get suitable lodgings, medical attendance if necessary, and I will come to you when I can give you up the jewels."

"I never could get there," replied Eve. "I fear you are right; I feel so strangely. I must rest awhile before I attempt to return."

Cecil was thoroughly alarmed now. She saw that Eve was really too ill to attempt to walk back to the village, while it was most essential that her presence there should not be discovered. She felt that she dared not risk introducing her into the household on any false representation—the peril was too imminent to herself. At the same time something must be done for her former kind mistress.

Mr. Frampton, she knew, had been busy all the morning in the library over his private correspondence, and was most likely still occupied there. It was nearing noon now, and the servants would be all busy in their particular departments. She felt that she must venture taking Eve within, trusting that nourishment and rest might restore her to strength sufficient for her return.

She hoped, if she could escape Olive's observation, to gain her own room unnoticed, with her companion. Chance seemed to favor her. She heard the murmur of distant voices, and through the foliage caught the glimmer of Olive's light dress as she went down the avenue, Victor by her side.

"Come with me," she said, speaking hurriedly. "You shall go in and rest. You see I trust you fully; for Heaven's sake be watchful, that you don't betray the confidence I place in you. Come!"

Eve rose, and steady herself by Cecil's arm, walled with feeble, tottering steps. Her strength, cruelly overtaken by the long night ride, and by hours of weary waiting at the bare village station-room for the morning, and the walk afterward, would have deserted her entirely but for the fever-flood in her veins.

Cecil led her toward a side entrance, but before it was reached heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Quickly as possible she drew her charge within an angle of the building, where a door opened into that portion which had been the original structure. They were half-concealed by the ivy swaying from the walls, and Cecil, peering out, saw Emmy Brown go by without glancing toward them.

She drew a long sigh of relief. The interruption or the heavy old door at their backs had given her a new thought. Eve had sunk down upon the broad stone steps, and leaving her there with a word of caution, Cecil went rapidly forward into the house alone.

Instead of going to her own chamber, she made her way directly to the housekeeper's room. The door was ajar and no one was within. A bunch of keys, rusted by long disuse, hung upon the wall. She went in softly and took them from the nail, and then sped swiftly through the darkened passageways into that unoccupied portion of the house near which she had left Eve.

She fitted the key into the ponderous lock of the heavy door, and exerting all her strength, it turned with a harsh, grating sound. The door creaked upon its hinges, and fell back slowly, as if resisting the will which moved it.

Eve obeyed her word in the same unquestioning, stupefied way in which she had submitted to be guided before. Cecil half-led, half-supported her through the empty halls and up the winding staircase, carpetless and black with age. Above was a square landing large as a moderate-sized room, from each side of which doors opened.

The mistress of Frampton Place had once explored

these unused apartments in gratification of an idle curiosity, and now had no difficulty in deciding which was best suited to her purpose.

She led the way into a room, oblong in shape, with deep recesses in which the high narrow windows were set. Ivy crept over them without, and though the heavy faded draperies were looped back, the light which struggled in still left the apartment in semi-obscenity.

There was a carpet, worn thin, and gray with dust upon the floor.

There was no bed, but a wide old sofa in a corner, so heavy and substantial that it appeared a fixture there, supplied the place of one. The room had evidently been well furnished in its day; a great square mirror, across which spiders had spun their webs, its gilt frame all tarnished now, filled the space between two recesses on one side. Everywhere else the walls were bare black panels; there was no fireplace, and no outlet, save the door by which they had entered.

Cecil, with her handkerchief, dusted off the faded velvet cushions of the old sofa, and Eve, trembling from weakness and fatigue, sunk down upon it. Her blood was fever hot, but over-exertion quelled the fever force with a torpor which deadened her senses to the action of pain. It seemed to her that she wanted nothing so much as quietude and rest.

She sank almost immediately into a doze, and Cecil, after seeing her as comfortable as circumstances would admit, went softly away, locking the door after her.

She detached the key belonging to it from the ring, and succeeded in replacing the others in the house-keeper's room, unobserved.

Then, worn upon by the occurrences of the morning, she retired to her own chamber. She did not go down to lunch that day, but pleaded a headache, and had a cup of strong tea brought to her.

Afterward she darkened the room, and threw herself upon a couch, not to sleep, but to think.

Late in the afternoon she paid a stolen visit to Eve, taking with her a pitcher of ice-water, and the tray containing her own luncheon.

Eve lay in a deep stupor, from which Cecil's presence did not arouse her. The latter, regarding her intently, went away with a satisfied expression upon her face.

Eve never woke until the gray dawn of the following day was straggling in at the dimmed windows. Then every limb seemed chained down by a dead weight, and all her faculties put to rest except her sense of burning thirst.

With an effort she put out her hand, and it came in contact with the pitcher of water left by her side.

She dragged her head wearily from the pillows, and drank long and eagerly. Then she slept again, more naturally, and flashes of pain occasionally penetrated her unconsciousness, causing her to stir and moan without awaking.

CHAPTER XV.

THE POTENT POTION.

DURING the evening of the day treated of in the preceding chapter, Cecil announced her determination of personally going to the city to give directions regarding the altered setting of the diamonds.

So in the gray of early morning Giles drove the carriage over to the village depot, and received her instructions for his return in the evening. At ten she was in New York, and calling first at Tiffany's, left the diamonds which she had brought with her.

After that she executed a few other trifling commissions, and then threading her way through the busy thoroughfare, hailed a passing car for a more obscure section of the city.

The street upon which she alighted was narrow and dark, shut in closely by tall, dingy buildings, from nearly all of which came the confused buzz of trade.

It was the last place where she expected to encounter one of their Frampton neighbors, but in the open doorway of a hardware emporium, scrutinizing an array of agricultural implements, stood Mr. Darnley.

Cecil passed by him so closely that by putting out her hand she could have touched him. Something drew his attention toward her retreating figure, and he turned to follow her with his gaze, dimly conscious of some familiar element about her.

"Thought for a moment it was some one I knew," he soliloquized. "It beats all what striking resemblances we chance across among people."

He saw her disappear within a doorway which the colored globes in the window indicated as belonging to a pharmacist's shop; and then turned back to forget his impression in his contemplation of patent plows and reapers.

The place Cecil entered was small and fitted up after the manner of stores of its kind. A narrow dark counter ran the whole length of the room, behind which was a range of shelves and drawers, and the atmosphere was heavy with the odor of drugs. A youthful clerk was busy over a mortar, but left it with alacrity as she entered.

His expectation of a customer was disappointed, however, for she passed through to an inner door and rapped. After a moment it opened to admit her into the presence of a tall, gaunt figure, with hair and flowing beard snow-white, and hollow, cavernous eyes, set in a countenance of unmistakably Jewish cast. He spoke, however, without the idiom which commonly marks the speech of his race.

"The lady requires private advice, I presume?"

His manner and his words were significant of the fact that his time was precious; but Cecil seated herself without removing the close folds of her veil, and motioned him to follow her example.

"I have heard much of Mr. Isaac's skill," she replied, "and may avail myself of it. I have been

recommended to you as having no equal in preparing beneficial compounds."

The Jew bowed his head in humble deprecation.

"My friends do me honor," said he. "I use my title of knowledge for the good of my fellow-man."

Some slight sarcasm tinged Cecil's voice.

"I have been assured of that, before!"

"Ah! perhaps the lady is not here for the first time!"

The Israelite regarded her suspiciously, and Cecil, though secretly annoyed, let no evidence of it appear.

"You mistake," she replied, "but I am anxious to test the virtues ascribed to your preparations."

"What is it you require?"

She dropped her voice to a lower cadence, though assured that they were quite alone.

"I wish a potion which will, when administered, act upon the patient's mind and will, leaving him powerless to project or carry out any active measure—something which will stupefy the senses without injuring the body."

"What you ask is difficult to prepare, and very expensive."

"You have but to name your price."

The Jew's sunken eyes glittered. He assumed a despondent expression.

"Such a potion and quite harmless? Ah, madam, that is impossible unless administered precisely as I direct. And I would not dare trust a powerful compound in the hands of a stranger—pardon me! you must know what danger I would incur."

Cecil made an impatient gesture and drew out her well-filled portmanteau.

"Lay aside your scruples, Mr. Isaac," she said, coolly. "My time is too limited to be spent in idle dallying."

A malicious gleam mingled with the covetous glitter in the Jew's downcast eyes. He spoke with persuasive softness.

"Madam will assure me that the potion is merely for the use she mentioned, and that my instructions shall be followed to the letter?"

Cecil leaned toward him, speaking impressively.

"Make it powerful, Mr. Isaac, and of such a nature that if a mistake should occur, no traces shall be left. You understand?"

"I understand!" the Israelite replied, endeavoring in vain to penetrate the folds of the concealing veil.

"Then pray let me have such a preparation at once. I will wait for it."

"Ah, madam! it requires time to produce such a compound."

"How much?" she queried, shortly.

"I think I could promise it in two days."

Cecil drew out her watch.

"It is now after one," she said. "I will call again at three precisely, when you will have the potion ready. Pray do not disappoint me. I have heard that you are never without preparations of the nature I require. Let me ask your price?"

"I told you it would be expensive."

"Will fifty dollars recompense you?"

He shook his head slowly.

"A hundred, at the lowest figure."

She did not stop to parley with him.

"Here is half to your hand! The remainder shall be paid when I receive the mixture. Remember, at three precisely."

"It will be ready, madam."

Cecil pushed aside her veil slightly as she counted the sum from her portmanteau, and the Israelite caught an imperfect glimpse of her features.

He stood in an attitude of deep thought, unmindful even of the crisp bills in his hand, after the door closed behind her.

"I have seen her before," he mused, "but where? The idea is there, but confused. Ah, I have it! Three—four—five years ago! I was less cautious then, and it was poison—deadly almost to the touch; but she had the antidote, too. I remember now."

When Cecil came again, later, he was ready with the mixture he had promised. It was harmless-looking, clear as water, and he averred quite tasteless.

"A single drop once a day will render the patient quiescent and tractable; double that quantity will produce stupor and confusion of the mental faculties. It cannot be given with safety in larger doses at consecutive periods."

"If the quantity be gradually increased, or an overdose accidentally given, what would be the effect? Do not be alarmed, Mr. Isaac; I promise you it shall not occur; but I wish to know the properties of the compound."

"An overdose, say six drops or more, would throw the patient into a state of coma, closely resembling actual death, from which only the most desperate remedies could revive him. A gradual increase—very gradual—would result in slow wasting away without any apparent cause. You will be very careful?"

"You have my word!"

She paid him the remainder of the price agreed upon, and departed.

It was sunset when she stepped from the cars at Frampton. The carriage was awaiting her, but, instead of Giles, Mr. Frampton himself had driven it there.

"I couldn't deny myself the pleasure," he said, as he met her, then turned to hail one among the passengers from the train.

"Ah, Darnley, is it you? Getting home, eh? Strange you didn't stumble upon Mrs. Frampton on the way."

"The cars were crowded," Cecil hastened to say. "My love to Sophie, Mr. Darnley. Send her over for a day or two; her quick wit will be most acceptable in suggesting needful arrangements. For the party, you know!"

The last was explanatory, as she noted his blank look.

His eyes followed them as the vehicle rolled away.

"It was she I saw; not strange that I thought the figure familiar. Wonder what she was doing in that quarter, though it's none of my business, to be sure!"

And with that reminder he dropped the thought.

Soon as she could do so, unperceived, Cecil slipped away to visit Eve. She found the latter lying yet as she had left her, her face flushed, and breathing labored. She was helpless in the clutches of the fever-fiend; the same that had prostrated the poor lad who had aroused her interest in the city lodging-house; the same that had fastened upon little Patsy Mulrooney, the child of her humble, kind friend, and former landlady.

She moved her head restlessly, and her parched lips opened to the moan:

"Water! water!"

Cecil had brought food and a pitcher of ice-water as on the preceding evening. She saw at a glance that the victuals upon the tray remained untouched, and knew how needless it would be to offer such. She gave her water at short intervals, until her thirst was for the time appeased; and then brought wraps and soft downy pillows with which to make the invalid's couch more comfortable.

When this was done, and she had bathed the fever-flushed face and burning hands, she went away again, leaving the blank darkness of the night, and the solitude of all those empty rooms to weigh down upon the distorted imagination of the sick girl.

After all, there was no present need of the potion she had procured. She had meant simply to keep Eve in a quiescent state, until she could mature her own plan of future action. The more she pondered, the more she felt that she could not give up the diamonds.

Beneath the fact that their absence would at once provoke questioning, was another consideration which she clung to with the faith which is born of selfish desire.

When Victor should know of this emergency, surely he would forego all other plans to snatch her from the threatening danger of exposure.

And the diamonds, if all else should fail, were in themselves sufficient to insure their future.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE UNSEEN HAND THAT SMITES.

OLIVE's birthnight *faté*!

It was scarcely dusk when Frampton House threw out its glare of myriad lights.

They kept orthodox hours in Frampton, notwithstanding its proximity to the city, and consequent subjection to the demoralizing influences of fashionable example. At eight the carriages began to arrive, and at ten the whole assembly of invited guests moved within the light and fragrance of the reception-rooms.

Cecil, affable and an acknowledged favorite, played her part of hostess with graceful ease. Her dress was rich and *lizaire*, but exquisitely becoming, as indeed was everything she wore; black lace over snowy silk, with heavy falls of lace shading her neck and arms, but not concealing their rounded, delicate contour. Her hair was caught up in loose, waving masses, interwoven with the same glittering gems that sparkled at her throat and wrists.

Wonderfully well did the Collingsbrooke diamonds set upon her, and many an envying eye did they attract among the feminine portion of the guests. Could they have known all the deceit and wearing anxiety borne beneath that fair exterior, would they still have thought the result sufficient for the sacrifice made to secure it?

Did any remembrance haunt Cecil, as she caught glimpses of her radiant self in the surrounding mirrors, of that wasted figure and pallid, deathlike face—the wreck of the gentle girl whose name and place in life she had usurped? Both of them sheltered by the same roof, the one courted, flattered, lacking nothing wealth or affection could supply; the other neglected, suffering, dying for aught she could know.

Perhaps! At the last moment previous to her appearance below, she had stolen away in her rich dress with the glitter of the jewels she unlawfully possessed about her, for a brief visit to the sufferer. Some dread had weighed upon her all that day. A fear perhaps that Eve might arouse to baffle her in the very height of her stolen position.

Little need of fearing the spark of vitality which lingered yet in that senseless form. Eve lay so motionless that the other bent over her in affright, thinking her really dead; but the faint respiration, the almost imperceptible flutter of the pulse, reassured her. The disease had reached its most critical point, a crisis would be passed during the night.

Cecil went down all smiles to meet the arriving guests, the apparent incarnation of happiness, knowing that all alone the life she had wronged was struggling feebly against the fearful power of death.

It was nearing midnight, and the gayety was at its height, when she threaded her way through the crowd and stepped unperceived out through one of the open windows. Some merry young couples were promenading the verandas, but she avoided these, and gathering her dainty garments close about her, sped swiftly and silently down the graveled pathway.

At a little distance she encountered Victor, consoling himself during the solitary moments of waiting by smoking beneath the starlight. He threw away his cigar as she approached.

"Will you always doubt me, Cecil?" he demanded, as he paced slowly by her side within the shadow of the bordering foliage. "Did it need a new evidence to convince you of my truth? Certainly, you have it now that I have stolen away from my *fiancée*, on

the night which announces our betrothal, to swear my firm allegiance to you only, and my intention of using her only as a stepping-stone to fortune."

"I don't doubt you, Victor; but I have come to make one more appeal. Don't persist in the course you have set yourself to follow. Let us forget everything for each other before we forfeit the happiness which may yet be ours. Don't let us wait for Fate to dash the wine of life from our lips through our dallying over it."

"You are speaking strangely, Cecil. Surely, you know me well enough to believe that I am not easily swayed from a purpose. I credited you with more strength of mind than to take up with improbable forebodings."

"But if you are convinced that it is no simple fancy, Victor? If you knew me threatened by an imminent danger?"

"You know you could rely upon me. But there can be no danger until we have brought it down upon ourselves."

"Listen, Victor. I told you the truth of what I believed regarding Eve Collingsbrooke's death, but it was a mistake after all. I did not know until less than a fortnight ago she came to me."

She paused. It was in her mind to tell him all the truth. But she hesitated, knowing that the impression of impending evil which weighed upon her would fade away to his matter-of-fact view, should he know Eve's present helplessness.

"Well," he questioned, with manifest anxiety. "She came to you here, you say?"

"Yes; she came to me, but with no ill-will or purpose of revenge. Yet she asked of me what it will be an impossibility to perform. She demanded only the restitution of the diamonds which you know are rightfully hers. I put her off for the time, but the reprieve I gained has almost expired. Exposure threatens me; and you, Victor, must save me from the consequences."

"Why not give her the jewels?" he asked. "They will not balance against Olive's fortune and your marriage settlements. Rid yourself of her importunities when you can do so at so easy a rate, and we will compass our end undisturbed."

"I dare not. Their absence would be almost immediately discovered, and a false pretext would not account for their disappearance."

"Simulate a burglary," he suggested.

"No, for they would be traced to her with little difficulty, and the explanation we wish to avoid be thus precipitated. And, besides, with the diamonds in my possession, we need fear no evil in the future should all else fail. They are certainties; the rest we must trust to chance."

"Then you must find means to evade her demand. If this troublesome counterpart of yours has no influential friends to back her, I will find means to insure her silence until her disclosures can be of no moment to us. Leagued together, we will not be thwarted by a single woman, Cecil."

She felt that it was useless to plead her cause further. She must give up to him in this as she felt she would ever do in all cases where it came to a contest of their two wills.

"She was kind to me once," she said, "and I would not like to have her subjected to the harsh measures you hint at. I shall endeavor to satisfy her for a time. Tell me once more that Olive is nothing to you, that I am everything; it will give me patience to wait as well as courage to work."

"You are nervous, to-night, Cecil, or you would not need the assurance. You have it though, freely. Olive is nothing more to me than the mere instrument to work out my will. I do not love her; you alone ever have or ever can sway me through that passion. I shall have no compunction when once my end is gained in leaving her for you. Are you satisfied now?"

"Only because it must be," she answered, in a low voice.

They had been walking back and forth along one of the principal paths intersecting the grounds, and had penetrated further now than at any previous turn. Neither of them saw a figure that started forward, and then checking its motion drew back into shadow as they retraced their steps.

It was Richard Holstead, who, delayed upon the way, had just arrived. He had paused a moment in the grounds to view the house with its windows like glaring Argus eyes, and listen to the soft strains of melody that were wafted out upon the night air. He had not observed their approach until Victor's concluding words caught his ear. He started to follow, but restrained himself, too honorable to commit a questionable act even for a good end; neither did he succeed in identifying D'Arno's companion.

They disappeared, and he slowly approached the house, pondering over the declaration he had accidentally overheard. He had not mistaken it, and he felt that some plot was in progress, which, if left to work, would terminate fatally for Olive's peace.

The knowledge thrilled him, for it brought to him the two-fold conviction that he could be of use to her, and that she might not be irreparably lost to him.

Olive had entered fully into the spirit of the evening's entertainment. Sustained during the earlier hours by Victor's presence at her side, she had blushingly received the open congratulations of the cordial, honest neighbors. Afterward she mingled freely with the guests, everywhere the center of a little coterie that came and went and changed but still clustered around her.

It was late when Sophie Darnley penetrated the circle and drew her away to a secluded corner.

"I dare say you have been priding yourself upon exclusiveness as a prospective bride, she said, "but I'm going to give you a Roland for an Oliver. Walter and I have just concluded to sink

the memory of standing feuds in the sea of future connubial bliss."

"And you thought to surprise me?" Olive smiled. "As though that consummation had not been the expectation of the neighborhood for months! I am sincerely glad, Sophie, and congratulate you with all my heart."

"Well, then, since you are not surprised, no more am I," Sophie rattled on. "I've felt it in my bones, as the sea-captain said when the storm broke, which his rheumatic joints predicted. Not that I'm of such a mercurial disposition, but you see, Walter has persecuted me so long I'm obliged to take him at last in pure self-defense."

"What martyrdom!" Olive ejaculated in mock horror.

Sophie soon drifted away from the interesting subject, to pass remarks upon the shifting figures in the scene before them.

"Mrs. Frampton is the cynosure of all eyes, and no wonder—she is inimitable. Almost too richly dressed, I should say, for a hostess; but she bears it well."

"There is Mr. Holstead, too; I did not know he was here. What a prince among men he looks when compared with insignificant little Percy Gray by his side. Really if Walter had been less importunate I think I should have been tempted to lay siege to the fortress of Mr. Holstead's affections."

"What can ail your uncle, Olive? He has left the room, looking wretchedly ill; and there, Dr. Storms is following him. They have not been observed by the company; now, Mr. Holstead, too, has gone quietly out. What can it mean?"

What it meant did not transpire to the knowledge of the household until later, when the last guest had departed. Then the truth came out. Mr. Frampton was stricken down with the fever which, unknown to him, had been brought within his walls.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHAT WILL NOT A WOMAN IN LOVE DO.

Doctor Strong remained throughout the night. At daybreak he went away, leaving minute directions for the patient's treatment, and at noon called in on his return from other professional calls.

He spoke cheerfully of the case, but impressed the necessity of having his instructions implicitly followed.

"Mr. Frampton's vigorous constitution will withstand a much harder siege than this promises to be," he said; "I do not apprehend a violent attack if it comes to the worst, and I think the prompt measures already taken have served to avert other than a light form of the disease. With ordinary care and watchfulness he will be up again within a week."

Cecil had thrown aside her rich garments, enveloping her form in a quilted *negligee* of dove-colored cashmere, and all the forenoon retained her place by her husband's side. Now, she listened intently to the doctor's directions, and afterward with apparent reluctance relinquished her station to Olive, who affectionately insisted that she must take needed repose.

She had not been near Eve all the morning. Now she felt that it would only be additional suspense to longer defer the time which should assure her of the other's fate.

She paused on the deserted landing to gain command over her panting breath, and fiercely-beating heart. She had not once wished actual harm to befall Eve, and she shrank even now from the possibility of finding her beyond power of asserting her claim again to her own (Cecil's) discomfiture. Her hand shook as she fitted the key into the lock, but her nerves were under complete subservience when she went in at last.

She crossed the floor and knelt by the side of the couch. A glance dispelled the horror which the utter stillness of the room had called up. The crisis had passed, leaving Eve weak and helpless as a little child, but with a new lease upon the life which had been so nearly wrested from her.

She opened her eyes wonderingly as Cecil stooped over her, and murmured her name faintly.

"Cecil!"

"Be very quiet," Cecil said, knowing intuitively that the time recently passed was as a blank or an obscure vision to the other. "You have been ill and are still very weak."

"I have been dreaming, I think, horrible things! Where is papa?"

For the time all remembrance of her past sufferings was blotted out, and Cecil would not recall those grievous reminiscences.

"You must see no one until you have gained strength," she answered, evasively. "Sleep if you can; it will do you more good than any medicine, now."

Eve smiled silently. She was too confused yet to note her strange surroundings and wonder at them. She closed her eyes, and soon slept softly as the infant which has known no care in life."

"I must not let her suspicions be aroused," reflected Cecil, as she gazed on the thin face where just the faintest tinge of warmth broke the transparent whiteness of the skin. "It is time now for the potion to do its work."

"So, when she came again, bringing broth that had been ostensibly prepared for the other invalid, she had the vial of colorless liquid with her. Just a drop in the drink she held to Eve's lips, but she knew it was all her purpose required.

She sought her chamber afterward and tried to gain a few moments' repose. But the vial containing the potion which she had concealed in her bosom, seemed like a thorn planted there, painfully rankling.

She took it out and held it up to the light. The

clear compound, so seemingly innocent, had a fascination for her which she could not resist. Over and over again she conned the substance of the words the old Jew had spoken.

"A single drop once a day will keep the patient in a quiescent, tractable state; double that quantity will produce stupor and confusion of the mental faculties. An overdose produces coma, which ends in death without leaving any apparent trace."

Then words which Victor had spoken to her once since their evil compact had been made, rose up and ranged themselves along with these.

"Were it not for your husband it might be different. Were you free now I might renounce every other consideration for you alone."

It seemed so easy to free herself from the whole complicated toil by a single bold stroke. With the fear of Hugh Frampton's vengeance forever removed, his wealth in her hands, she need fear no rival, and the consideration which swayed Victor now would be easily swept away.

It was useless to woo sleep with such thoughts in her mind. She arose and confronted her image in the mirror above the dressing-table. Her face was aglow with bright color, her eyes sparkling, her lips scarlet with excitement. No one could have deemed that murderous thoughts were astir beneath that beautiful mask. She scarcely realized it herself. She was dwelling on the future which lay beyond the space between to be bridged by the commission of that dark crime.

She went back to her husband's side with the vial still concealed in her bosom.

That night and the next day passed, and no persuasions could swerve Cecil from her post in the sick room.

It was growing dusk when the doctor came again. His assured manner as he entered changed as he bent over the patient in the semi-gloom.

He called for a light and contemplated him in grave silence.

"There has been a change, and not for the better," he said. "I should have been called before this."

"He has slept almost constantly," Cecil hastened to say. "We thought he was doing well."

"This is no natural sleep. It is a stupor more pernicious in its effects than even delirium would be. I am free to confess it is a symptom I cannot reconcile with his former condition."

Cecil followed him into the hall as he was going away.

"Don't deceive me, doctor," she begged, clasping her white hands and lifting her fair face full of anxious pleading. "It is mistaken kindness to attempt to blind me! Will he live?"

"Fie, fie!" ejaculated the doctor, in the abrupt manner peculiar to himself. "Didn't I tell you he's in no absolute danger? Only see that my directions are strictly followed, and I pledge myself to bring him up sound as new."

"But, doctor—pardon the doubt—I thought you did not exactly understand his case."

"Well, you are partly right," he answered, bluntly. "I have never had a parallel case, but I don't despair, for all that. I don't mind telling you plainly, madam, that every thing depends upon his rousing from this unaccountable stupor; yet I don't think it advisable to employ severe agencies. The fever is checked in the start; consequently there's no fictitious strength to combat it; but a man of Mr. Frampton's tenacity should be able to throw off such torpor. That's a plain statement of the case, and nothing very alarming in it, I assure you."

Cecil stood looking after him as he strode out. An inscrutable smile crept across her face as her fingers clutched the concealed vial.

Victor D'Arno, himself unseen, had witnessed this interview from behind the sweeping curtains of an oriel window near by. He followed Cecil's retreating figure, muttering:

"She loved me, but in her anger once she would have struck a murderous blow. He is an obstacle in her way now; will she be more lenient with him? I must watch, and perhaps turn the circumstance in my favor."

That evening, as before, Cecil retained her place in the sick-room. The others came and went silently, sharing her vigil. When she was alone for a moment, she drew out the hidden vial, dropping from its contents into a goblet upon the table where the medicines were ranged.

Victor, entering at the moment, noticed the quick action of her hand dropping to her side.

"You must not fatigue yourself, Cecil," said he, in a tender, commanding tone which he knew she would not resist. "Go now, and get what rest you can. I am to watch through the night, and will call you if there is any change. What if this should result in perfect freedom to you, my own?"

Her quick glance flashing up to him was sufficient answer.

She was really very weary.

"I think I can sleep now. It is time to give the medicine; afterward I will follow your advice."

She turned toward the range of vials, but his quick motion anticipated her.

"This yellow liquid?" he asked, interposing his form between her and the little table. "Five drops, I think was the order, and the powder in an hour."

In the brief moment he diverted her attention, he had managed to deftly rinse the goblet, emptying its contents into his handkerchief. Now he dropped the liquid into it and placed it to the lips of the invalid. Cecil watched the unconscious man swallow every drop, and went away satisfied.

Quiet fell upon the household. A tiny bronze clock upon the wall pointed its silent fingers to the midnight hour. The night-lamp diffused a softened light through the room.

Victor drew close to the bedside, fixing his eyes intently upon the sick-man's face.

Moments flew by. Victor's face grew rigid and white as the one pressed against the pillows, and great, cold drops started out upon his brow, but his fixed gaze never wavered.

Mr. Frampton moved his head slightly and sighed. Victor drew a deep inspiration as of a relief, and a moment after the other's eyes opened.

Victor's lips moved, but he essayed twice before any sound escaped them.

"Follow my commands," he said, slowly and clearly. "Lift your hand."

The hand which had lain powerless upon the counterpane was immediately raised.

"That will do. Repeat after me. 'I have no power to resist your will.'"

Clearly and distinctly fell the repetition:

"I have no power to resist your will!"

"It is my will that you, Victor D'Arno, wed with my niece, Olive Tremaine!"

Mechanically the words passed Mr. Frampton's lips.

Victor clasped his hands over his eyes, and then passed them over Mr. Frampton's brow. The latter relapsed almost immediately into his former unconscious state.

D'Arno wiped his damp brow, and, pouring wine from a flagon at hand, took a deep draught.

"It was a terrible strain," he muttered to himself, "but I have him now pliant to my will as wax in the molder's hands."

"If it is as I suspect, that she is drugging him, all the better; but he must not have an overdose until I have accomplished my end."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DOCTOR ON A TRAIL.

THREE days passed. Mr. Frampton rallied slightly, but for the most part was unconscious of all that took place about him.

Doctor Strong came and went with calm, impassive features, that told no tale to anxious observers.

The fourth morning a drizzling rain set in, rendering the atmosphere chilly and uncomfortable for the season, throwing an additional gloom over the inmates of Frampton House.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders dismally as he paused in the doorway to button the collar of his waterproof coat close about his throat. His calling left him no choice between blue sky and leaden, down-pouring clouds, so he plunged unhesitatingly into the uninviting out-door space.

His horse, shaggy of coat, uncouth but strong of limb, and like his master inured to all phases of weather, jogged unconcernedly over the road toward the village. Midway he drew rein as Mr. Darnley approached from the opposite direction.

"Just from Frampton Place," he replied to the latter's inquiry. "Are you going there? If so, you may as well turn back again: I've left standing orders that none but the family be admitted to him."

"How is he?" Mr. Darnley asked, turning his horse's head round about.

"So-so!" returned the doctor, after the non-committal manner of his class. "Little change—fluctuating—nothing decisive."

"He has the fever, I've been told," continued the other, "the same which has created such a panic nearer the city. Is it likely to set hard upon him?"

Mr. Darnley was a well-known friend of Hugh Frampton's, and the doctor answered him more unreservedly than he would have done most inquirers.

"Three days ago, if you had asked me that, I would have told you not, decidedly. I don't know what to make of his case. If it wasn't so improbable, I should think some one was tampering with his condition; anyway the medicines are not producing the results they should."

Mr. Darnley's face caught an anxious shade.

"Who would do it?" he asked.

"No one, of course. I should not have mentioned it even as a supposition. It would be hard for any person to work him such ill, even if an object was to be gained by it, his wife is so devoted to him. She scarcely leaves his side, and herself sees that my instructions are carried out."

"His wife?" repeated Mr. Darnley, slowly. "Young wives sometimes have an interest in ridding themselves of elderly husbands."

The same thought had occurred to Doctor Strong, and while the doubt had been too shadowy to act upon, his allusion to Mrs. Frampton had been made less in good faith than as a bait to draw out the other's opinion. He kept his eyes averted, lest his intention should there betray itself, and waited.

"Frampton's wife seems to have taken the whole neighborhood by storm," continued Mr. Darnley, "but, for all that, I haven't fancied her. It may be all prejudice on my part, for I have nothing to base it on, unless—

He stopped short as some dim idea broke upon him. The doctor eyed him now, impatiently.

"Well?"

"A couple of weeks, or more, ago, the last time I was in New York I stumbled across her in an out-of-the-way part of the city, not a very reputable section. I did not recognize her at the time, but I'd willingly take oath to it now that I saw her go into a drug store on — street. I remember noticing the name above the door; it was M. Isaac!"

"M. Isaac! No. 337?" queried the doctor.

"I can't say for that, but it may have been."

"I know the man; have had dealings with him, in fact. I think you have given me a serviceable idea, Mr. Darnley. That Jew has more than ordinary skill in his craft and may furnish me with a hint

or two where I've found my own knowledge lacking. I turn off here; good-morning to you!"

Doctor Strong did not intend that the other should fathom his suspicions, and assured that he had gained all information bearing upon the point at stake, thus abruptly left him.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DEATH-CHAMBER PROMISE.

AT Frampton House every minor interest was apparently absorbed by the issue at stake in the sick-room. It was known now that the master's condition was at least precarious. Olive's grief, though silent, was deep and heartfelt.

Cecil had grown nervous, and incessant watching was leaving her wan, but no less resolute in attendance.

Her husband's state was a puzzle to her, as it had been to the physician. Every day she had dropped the potion into the draught prepared for him, gradually increasing the quantity used; but the effect was not as decided as she could wish.

She was giving it to Eve in minute portions at the same time with satisfactory result. The latter was rapidly gaining strength, but her mind had not cleared, and she remained quite content and unsuspecting in her prison chamber.

Cecil could not account for the slow action of the mixtura upon her husband. The truth was that Victor had exercised an espionage over her, and through his watchfulness but little of the drug had been actually administered. For his own reasons he left her in ignorance of the action he was taking.

The afternoon was wearing away, when Victor, who was left for a brief space alone with the invalid, hastily summoned the others.

"There has been a change," he said. "Whether for better or worse I cannot tell."

They hastened silently into the room, Cecil, Olive and Richard. The servants gathered in the corridor, an awe-stricken group, whispering to each other that the end was near.

Mr. Frampton was bolstered in a half-sitting posture. His eyes, wide open, seemed fixed and vacant, yet he apparently recognized those about him, and addressed them coherently for the first time in days.

"Cecil, Olive, are you both there?" he asked, feebly.

They pressed close to the bedside.

"My dearest ones! it is hard to know that I must leave you."

Cecil was white and speechless. Olive, affected beyond control, knelt by him, clasping his hand, which she shuddered to find clammy and cold.

"Uncle! dear uncle!" she cried, striving in vain to repress her tears. "Oh, it cannot be so! You will not be taken from us for many years."

"Don't cry, pet! I feel the truth of what I say. My life is almost drifted out, and it is better so than that I should live and suffer."

He paused, breathing heavily. His utterance was slow, yet distinct, but no shade of expression moved his features. He was pallid as death, and his set gaze on the vacancy before him never wavered.

"Olive!"

"What is it, dear uncle?"

"You have been a good, obedient child. You will not refuse me my dying wish?"

She sobbed aloud, but struggling with her grief, answered him:

"Ask me any thing you will! Let me prove that I am not ungrateful for your long kindness to me."

"I should like to see you happy and beyond fear of trouble coming to you. There is another who loves you, scarcely better, but with a different love from that which I have borne you. Victor will protect you when I am gone, and it will be a comfort to me to see you his wife. Send for a minister that he may unite you here where I can bestow my dying blessing."

Victor, shrouded by the curtains at the bed's foot, came forward now to her side.

"You will not deny him his request, Olive? I will never let you repent the act."

Richard started forward as Victor's arm fell carelessly upon her shoulder. Knowing the baseness of the man's heart, he would as soon have seen her writhed about by a serpent's coils.

Remembering the place, and the danger of excitement to Mr. Frampton, he restrained the indignant protest upon his lips.

Olive shuddered.

"It seems so terrible to thus unite what should be my greatest joy with my greatest grief."

Dick, hearing her words, thought with an indefinable thrill:

"She has not perfect faith in him, or she would entertain no doubt that life with him should be her greatest joy."

Cecil seemed robbed of power or desire to act. Her fingers were interlaced in a tight clasp across her bosom, her face rigid and anguished. She saw the result she was periling her soul to avert being brought to pass through her own unmeaning agency.

"You will consent, to please me, Olive?" Mr. Frampton said, his voice dying to a whisper. "I am growing very weary, but I want your assurance before I can rest."

"It shall be as you wish," Olive replied. "I could not deny you anything now, uncle Hugh."

"Then send—send at once—for the minister." He spoke with painful effort. "Don't delay, or it will be too late."

Victor stepped to the door and beckoned Giles, who formed one of the waiting group in the corridor, to approach.

"Go for Mr. Deane with all haste, and bring him

back with you. Tell him your master is very low, and his services are immediately required."

"Stay a moment." Richard Holstead commanded Giles. "On your way call for Doctor Strong, and send him at once. Make all possible speed as you value your master's chance of safety."

The injunction was scarcely needed. Giles went upon his mission with a celerity which promised its speedy fulfillment.

Richard returned to the darkened chamber, and finding Mr. Frampton apparently in a quiet slumber, after some ineffectual efforts, succeeded in drawing Olive away.

"Let me speak with you if only for a moment," he whispered.

She followed him into an adjoining apartment, weeping yet, but more silently.

"It may seem harsh to speak to you as I am about to do," he began. "Let me beg of you not to fulfill the promise you have just given. Do not consent to this marriage. I am counseling you for the happiness of all your future life, and even the weight of a dying man's request should not balance against that. I know Victor D'Arno is unworthy of you, Olive; I know that he does not love you as you should be loved; I believe that he has wooed you only to consummate some selfish and villainous end. I don't ask you to believe all this at once; only defer the marriage which will otherwise place your safety in his power."

"I cannot disappoint my uncle," she replied, tearfully. "I could never forgive myself if he died sorrowing over any act of mine."

"You would sacrifice your whole life to afford him a few moments' satisfaction over the gratification of a whim which may be the result of weakness or wandering fancy, and which he may recover yet to repent unavailingly."

"It is useless to say more," Olive interrupted him, firmly. "You know it is only precipitating my marriage, and in the end what can the little time matter? You should not speak to me as you have done of Victor, who will soon be my husband."

With that she left him, returning to her position by Mr. Frampton's side.

Within an hour Giles returned, bringing the clergyman with him. Dr. Strong was not at his own house, and he (Giles) had left a message with the doctor's housekeeper, which would be delivered immediately on the doctor's return.

Victor explained to the minister the nature of the office required of him, and led him directly to the sick man's presence.

Mr. Frampton roused himself at their approach, and feebly checked the clergyman when he would have uttered some words of pious exhortation.

"The marriage first," he said. "If there is time you can pray with me afterward!"

Victor, approaching Olive, took her unresisting hand in his, and led her before the holy man.

Reverend Mr. Deane, a meek, studious man, cast an undecided glance about him, and began the ceremony which should link them man and wife.

CHAPTER XX.

THE DEED IS DONE!

DICK HOLSTEAD stood by in gloomy silence. He had done what he could, and was powerless to save the girl he loved from what he felt assured must prove future misery to her.

Much as he suffered, Cecil's concealed passions were yet more intense. Every sense was strained to the utmost, but she was outwardly composed as the minister's monotonous voice broke the silence which had fallen.

In a short exhortation he impressed the solemnity of the rite he was about to celebrate, and the faithful performance of the duties it involved.

Then he began, in an impressive manner, the usual marriage formula.

Victor's response was given, clear-toned and steady. Then the minister addressed Olive.

"Do you accept this man as your lawful husband? Will you cling to him through life; through evil report and good report; through sickness and health; riches and poverty—till death do you part?"

Instead of a reply there came a low, terrified shriek from Olive. She was gazing straight before her, her face blanched, her limbs trembling beneath her weight. The ordeal of the afternoon had shaken her more than any one imagined, and now she sunk fainting to the floor.

Unperceived by the rest, the door had swung noiselessly open, and a shadowy, white-robed figure was outlined upon the threshold. To Olive, wrought upon by strong mental emotion, it appeared like a warning from the spirit world.

Even Cecil was startled for a moment by the unexpected apparition. There was something strange in the air of the appearance—a vague yet gentle expression in the pure face, surrounded by a floating mist of soft, bright hair, that struck a feeling of awe through every one there.

For an instant breathless silence reigned in the room. Then the door, impelled by some passing draught, swung shut again.

Richard, closely followed by the clergyman, sprang forward and tore it open. The corridor without was vacant; no sight or sound to indicate that human presence had been there.

Hesitating momentarily, the two proceeded to search the passageways and apartments near at hand, but without result. Then Richard went below to question the servants, but no one could account for the strange appearance.

The interruption broke the inaction which Cecil had imposed upon herself. As Richard and Mr. Deane rushed from the apartment, Victor stooped to raise Olive's prostrate form.

Mr. Frampton lay motionless upon the pillows

only his open, staring eyes indicating that he saw or heard aught that passed around him. Cecil glided to his side, all of the demoniacal hate which had gathered in her heart distorting her features.

Quick as thought she drew the fatal vial from its place of concealment upon her person, and forced it between the pale lips of her husband. A shudder passed over his frame; he gasped, and lay perfectly still.

Swift as she had been, Victor turned and saw her motion. With a bound he reached her side, and snatching at her wrist, drew her forcibly away.

"What have you done?" he hissed in her ear. "Murderess now as you would have been before! I tell you, he knew nothing of all that has been done; he was mesmerized, and only obeyed the power of my will."

She wrenched herself from his grasp, and turned to him wickedly exultant.

"Then I am glad! Glad to have foiled you; glad to be able now without fear of him to force your truth to me. Oh, Victor, you have wielded me, body, heart and soul, and now you must abide by my claim upon you; for after this that foolish girl can never be yours."

Not a shudder nor a pang of remorse for the crime she had committed. No horror of the weight of guilt which bore upon her. Blind faith yet in her own future, and in the man for whom she had steeped herself in darkest moral infamy.

Yet when, a moment later, Richard and Mr. Deane returned from their fruitless search, she was kneeling by the bed wiping the moisture from the poor, cold lips.

She looked up into the former's face appealingly.

"I think he has fainted. Give him brandy—something, quick!"

He put her gently aside and stooped over the motionless form. He laid his hand upon the cold forehead, and then, turning down the covering, upon the heart which no longer beat.

Tears, of which he was not ashamed, stood in his eyes and his voice was broken as he said:

"All is over; he is dead!"

CHAPTER XXI. TAKING UP THE THREADS.

No doubt the reader has already inferred that the interrupter of the marriage ceremony was none other than Eve.

During the morning Cecil had as usual visited her in the isolated chamber. Though she entertained no apprehension of Eve's discovery by any of the household, she had not once relaxed the precaution she adopted upon the first day of her confinement there. The key belonging to the room was never out of her possession for a moment.

But this day, in an absent-minded mood, she drew it from the door without having turned it in the lock.

Eve's mind was in a confused state, the effect of the drug which was daily administered. After Cecil left her she stood by the window, watching the dull drip of the monotonous rain without. Growing weary of this, she wandered about the room, arranging the furniture and turning over a few old books which it contained.

At last, in her aimless way, she tried the door, and finding it yield to her touch, left the room for the first time since she had entered it, weeks before, and making her way unobserved to the inhabited rooms, appeared in the doorway of that one where Mr. Frampton lay.

Rendered timid by her solitary existence during the past few weeks, startled at finding herself in the presence of strangers, as well as by the evident consternation her appearance produced, she turned and fled as the closing door shut her from their sight. Back as she thought by the way she came, but in reality into an opening wing, and at last into the chamber devoted to Richard Holstead's use.

She could hear the sound of voices and of footsteps passing back and forth, but no one came into her retreat. She crouched down in a corner, but as time passed and she was left undisturbed, she arose, and groping her way through the dusk which had now gathered, threw herself upon the bed and soon slept.

Cecil stole away to the now deserted prison room at a later hour. She expected to find that Eve had made her way back there since the search had failed to discover her. She was not much alarmed at not finding her there.

Should she be discovered about the premises, she would doubtless be considered harmlessly insane, and her presence thus be easily accounted for.

The silence which follows the presence of death rested upon the household. The night passed, and the succeeding day brought some intimate friends full of sympathy for the family's bereavement.

It was noon when Doctor Strong came, his usually impassive face worn upon by traces of fatigue. Emmy Brown met him in the hall, and nothing doubting but that he knew of the calamity which had fallen, led him directly to the death-chamber.

The closely-drawn blinds left the room in almost total darkness. Doctor Strong turned back from the threshold with sudden dread.

"What has happened?" he demanded.

"Oh, sir; I thought you knew," returned Emmy, with a burst of tears. "He is dead!"

"Dead! Thank Heaven, I am in time if it be as I think. When did he die?"

Emmy told him brokenly.

The doctor passed into the room where Hugh Frampton lay rigidly still, and while he stood there Richard Holstead came quietly in.

"You were sent for," he said, "but I doubt if you could have averted this sad consequence."

"I was away," replied the doctor. "Holstead, I think I can depend upon you."

"I shall certainly betray no confidence," returned Dick, in some surprise. "But first let me claim a portion of your time. I have a case which I think will require your immediate attention."

Briefly he related the occurrences of the preceding evening, following with his discovery of the intruder whose appearance had broken off the marriage, quietly sleeping upon his bed.

"It is evident that her mind is unbalanced," said he. "She declares that she is Eve Collingsbrooke, which I presume you know was Mrs. Frampton's maiden name, and though wasted by illness, she bears a striking resemblance to that lady. There is a familiarity with truths, too, in what she says, which puzzles me."

"For instance, she gave me a tolerably succinct account of a fire in my native city, where her father perished and she lost proofs of her fancied identity. Strangely enough, it was from that very fire that I rescued the real Eve Collingsbrooke. She refers, too, to the diamonds which the latter has inherited, claiming them as rightfully her own."

"But when I questioned her she grew confused and distressed, and I thought it best not to agitate her until you had been consulted."

"I called Emmy Brown, who is a discreet girl, and, obtaining her promise of secrecy, left the stranger in her charge. She is still in my room, as least apt to be discovered there. Will you come with me and see what you can make of her case?"

He led the way to the apartment indicated, Doctor Strong following, with deep thoughtfulness depicted in his countenance. Eve was seated in an arm-chair before the grate, in which a slight fire blazed. On a stand drawn to her side was a tray containing a scarcely touched repast.

"This is the friend I promised to bring you," said Dick, introducing Doctor Strong. Eve greeted him in a quiet, lady-like manner. She was more collected than when Richard had seen her last, and save for a vague restlessness of manner and disconnection of thought, was quite at her ease.

In reply to their inquiries she repeated the portions of her story which Richard had briefly given. These were the strong incidents which had fixed themselves in her mind, and now that the effect of the potion was gradually wearing off, made themselves apparent, while minor incidents, which would have gone far to prove the truth of her assertions, remained yet obscured.

"But you know you cannot be Eve Collingsbrooke," Dick remonstrated. "She is Mrs. Frampton now."

"And so I was to have been," Eve declared. "I can't tell how it was—Cecil did it, I know. Oh, if I could but remember!"

She pressed her hand to her forehead, striving to clear her thoughts. Doctor Strong interposed.

"Never mind now; I am sure you are quite right. Holstead," in an aside, "the poor girl's story may not prove so improbable as you are inclined to think. At all events, humor her in it. Let me count your pulse, Miss Collingsbrooke!"

Eve gave him a grateful glance.

The doctor chatted on indifferent subjects for a moment, and then drew Holstead away.

"What she needs is freedom from all excitement. Give her time, and her mind will become lucid enough. She is suffering now from the effects of a powerful drug."

"A drug!" repeated Dick, wonderingly.

"Ah, you think I may be mistaken? I am not depending alone on my medical knowledge as a base for my assertion."

"The claims asserted by this poor girl, which have served to puzzle you so, may aid the unraveling of some mysterious points which I have failed to penetrate."

"You will be shocked at the revelation I am about to trust to you. But, first, let us retire beyond fear of interruption."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MASK STRIPPED AWAY.

It was the third night after Mr. Frampton's decease. In the death-chamber a couple of shaded tapers shed a dim light. The watchers for the night had taken their station in an adjoining room, but Doctor Strong, coming in, sent them away to a distant portion of the house—all except Mr. Darnley, who formed one of the number.

"It is almost the hour," the former said. "You, my good friend, knowing a little of the truth, will assist me with such duties as may arise with the occasion. Hist! somebody comes."

As he spoke, Cecil entered, leaning upon the arm of Victor, and closely followed by Olive, who appeared deeply dejected but quite calm. A moment later Richard came in alone, partially closing the door of communication between the two rooms. They were assembled in the one where the body lay, and Cecil, with a visible shudder, turned to Doctor Strong.

"It is by your request that we have come here in the dead of night, putting aside personal feeling, which would have prompted us to defer all temporal matters until the last sad obsequies were over. Let me beg of you that the presence of the dead shall not be profaned by any needless mockery."

Her voice broke, and she pressed her handkerchief to her face as she sunk into a seat.

"Madam," replied Doctor Strong, his intonation almost harshly stern, "for years I enjoyed the friendship of Mr. Frampton, and would be the last person to disparage his memory. You will admit my loyalty to him at least, before this interview is ended."

"I have not called you together at this time without sufficient object. But, before proceeding to di-

vulge that cause, let me relate a strange story which has recently come to my knowledge."

During the momentary pause which ensued no one broke the silence by words. Cecil, with apparent effort, checked her suppressed sobs, and assumed a listening attitude.

The doctor began:

"Almost a quarter of a century ago, one dark night in early spring-time, the inmates of the convent of St. Mary were disturbed at their late devotions by the violent ringing of the bell at their gates. The portress hastened out to admit the belated applicant for their hospitality, and returned ere long, bearing a basket, in which reposed a female child but a few weeks of age.

"The little one was the picture of beauty and health, and so won upon the affections of the good sisters that they resolved to adopt her as the child of their order.

"Years passed; and the waif thus cast upon their bounty arrived at the age of budding womanhood. She was destined to take the veil, and was in her novitiate, when her ripening beauty and mental attractions so endeared her to a pupil in the convent school—the only daughter of a wealthy English lady—that the latter determined to procure her emancipation.

"This she accomplished by the presentation of a handsome yearly stipend to the society, and Sister Cecilia—as she had been known—was received into the family of her benefactress as companion to the daughter.

"They treated her always with the utmost consideration, and in addition to other kindnesses, gave her their own name, permitting it to be understood that she was distantly related to them. Thus she became known as Cecil Blake.

"The daughter married early a Sicilian nobleman, and departed with him to his native home. Mrs. Blake died suddenly a few months later, having made no provision for Cecil's maintenance.

"At scarcely seventeen the latter found herself cast homeless and friendless upon the world, but she was possessed of an adventurous spirit and ample faith in her own abilities to insure success. This last was probably shaken somewhat by the experience of the first few months.

"After ineffectual efforts to procure more lucrative employment she succeeded in obtaining a position as nursery-governess in a well-to-do trader's family. Here she fell in with an adventurer named Arnaud, who, for his own reasons at the time, was endeavoring to win the confidence of the most influential tradespeople.

"He succeeded to such a degree that when he disappeared, a few weeks later, he carried with him a large sum of ready money obtained from them on various false pretenses.

"More than this, Cecil Blake, who had clandestinely married him, also disappeared; and though information on this point is not definite, it is presumed that they occupied some months traveling from one to another of the European capitals, making their appearance in the higher grades of society and meeting with varying success in the confidence game they practiced.

"Arnaud was a professional gambler, and at Baden-Baden became involved in a quarrel ending in a duel, in which he mortally wounded his antagonist. Compelled to fly the country, he next appeared in New York, where he gained only a precarious subsistence.

"Here he was implicated in some piece of detected villainy, and it was during the trial that the foregoing facts became known. Notwithstanding the suspicions that were strong against him, he succeeded, with a good fortune, more rare than deserving, in clearing himself of the charge preferred.

"During this time he had lived contentedly enough with his wife, but now began to tire of her. She followed him with a jealous devotion which began to restrain the liberty of action he desired. As a means of ridding himself of her, he hired a woman from the street to repeat a trumped up tale of his marriage during a previous visit to the United States, herself claiming to be his legal wife.

"The woman played her part well. Cecil was convinced, and frenzied alike with jealousy and a sense of the wrong done her, determined to be revenged upon the man who had thus played her false.

"She visited an Israelite who combined the avocations of chemist and pharmacist, and procured from him a poison productive of deadly results if once infused into the blood.

"Afterward she sought Arnaud, and upbraiding him with his deception, made an attempt to stab him with a stiletto which bore the poison upon its point.

"He averted the blow, but in doing so turned it upon herself. The wound inflicted was slight and would not have been dangerous but for the poison introduced into her veins. She knew her own peril, however, and lost no time in summoning the Jew from whom she had procured the deadly drug.

"He administered an antidote and succeeded in saving her life, though she was prostrated by a long illness before ultimate recovery. Meanwhile, Arnaud disappeared, and when she sought for him no trace could be anywhere found.

"Again she found herself thrown upon her own resources. She drifted about from place to place having no definite calling, but supporting herself in a respectably vagrant way as a solicitor for agencies; giving lessons in private families; serving occasionally as a model to rising young artists; and once assisting in a hair-dressing establishment, where a happy faculty of giving universal satisfaction had she so desired.

"She left it, however, to become companion to a

